

The Little Way: Ferdinand Ulrich on Accidents

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We live in a material reality. Obviously it is not the case that we live in a *merely* material reality, but it is worth remembering that we are corporeal substances given to be in a corporeal reality. Our materiality informs every aspect of our being, everything about us—including how we come to know.

The German philosopher Ferdinand Ulrich never forgets this about the human being or the reality in which the human is given to be—indeed, Ulrich, like his intellectual mentor and constant dialogue partner Thomas Aquinas, is a realist. That is to say that, like Thomas, Ulrich is always thinking about the world as it is given to man to inhabit and understand. This then includes thinking about matter, which, because of its status as lowest rung on the ladder of creation, is often overlooked in our thinking. Our materiality, with all of its implications for man, the world, and the task of man that is philosophy—that is, thinking and knowing being itself—is a touchstone for Ulrich’s metaphysics and indeed all of his work.¹

Ulrich’s dense and textured metaphysics can be approached in many ways, but perhaps none is so crucial as his attention to the small and seemingly insignificant, which is why he gives so much time and attention to matter throughout his corpus—for what could be more insignificant than that which does not exist in itself? Ulrich’s attention to matter, however, is not simply in the speculative mode, wondering about the nature of *potentia pura* (though this is also included), but rather this kind of speculation leads

¹ Ulrich begins his intellectual path, so to speak, thinking about matter, with a dissertation addressing the meaning of matter (and different interpretations thereof) in the work of Aquinas, Suárez, and Scotus: “Sein und Materie. Inwiefern ist die Konstruktion der Substanzkonstitution maßgebend für die Konstruktion der Materiebegriffes bei Suárez, Duns Scotus und Thomas?” (Doctoral diss., University of Munich, 1955).

Ulrich to thinking through the implications of materiality for man's being and knowing. One of these is what Ulrich refers to repeatedly throughout *Homo Abyssus*, his great work of metaphysics and meta-anthropology, as "the little way." In the first chapter of that book, Ulrich writes:

The light of being, since it doesn't cling to itself or allow reason to come to an end "next to" God, is therefore precisely what compels speculative reason to transcend beings into the absolute ground. This act of transcendence enraptures reason, which has been illuminated by being, elevating reason into the light of absolute truth, while reason precisely thereby enters onto the "little way" in the multiplicity of finite being.²

According to Ulrich, in order to know and understand being itself, or "absolute truth," as quoted just above, human reason must enter onto this "little way," which can be reached only "in the multiplicity of finite being."

The materiality of the world and the multiplicity of finite being therein have everything to do with each other, and Ulrich claims that, in order to know and understand absolute truth or being itself, precisely this multiplicity must be our starting point. Already then, at the beginning of *Homo Abyssus*, Ulrich draws our attention to the significance of matter.

Ulrich receives this phrase, "the little way," from none other than St. Thérèse of Lisieux, who, in accepting her littleness, so to speak, not as a burden but as a gift, was given to work great acts.³ We have a clue already,

² *Homo Abyssus* [HA], in *The Drama of the Question of Being*, trans. D. C. Schindler (Washington, DC: Humanum Academic Press, 2018), 21. For the remainder of this article, when a translator for non-English works (whether primary or secondary source) is not stated, the translation is my own.

³ See *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, trans. John Clarke, O.C.D., 3rd ed. (Washington, DC: ICS, 1996).

Though this article's focus is not Thérèse of Lisieux, some explanation of "the little way" (*le petite voie*) is necessary and helpful. There is much to be said—and much has already been written—about Thérèse's little way, but it is important to note that, while Thérèse's writings and life have affected the Church deeply and she has since her death been looked to as a spiritual light and leader (so much so that Pope John Paul II named her a doctor of the Church in 1997), Ulrich may be one of the first Catholic philosophers to understand Thérèse's work as an intellectual guide as well as spiritual. There are likely many factors contributing to this, but we could perhaps point here to Karl Rahner's description of Thérèse as contributing to this ignoring of the saint as an intellectual light: "I find many aspects of this saint's personality and writing irritating or merely boring. And if I were to explain what I find almost repulsive about them so that you could see why, it certainly wouldn't justify the trouble of doing so. There are

then, for beginning to understand how Ulrich conceives of matter and multiplicity: as that which, though nothing in itself, allows us to know the greatest truths—indeed, the “absolute truth.”

so many other things worth thinking about in the world and not needing elaborate explanation” (from *Christliche Innerlichkeit*, quoted in Bernard Bro’s *The Little Way: The Spirituality of Thérèse of Lisieux*, trans. Alan Neame [London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979]).

Once one recognizes it, one sees Thérèse’s influence all over Ulrich’s work: Stefan Oster writes that one could read *Homo Abyssus* as “Ulrich transl[ing] Hegel’s undertaking . . . into a conversation with Thérèse of Lisieux” (*Mit-Mensch-Sein: Phänomenologie und Ontologie der Gabe bei Ferdinand Ulrich* [Freiburg: Karl Alber, 2004], 421n357), however we will restrict ourselves to how he understands the little way in light of accidental being.

André Combes, whose studies of Thérèse Hans Urs von Balthasar calls “of great importance” (*Two Sisters in Spirit*, trans. Donald Nichols and Anne Elizabeth Englund [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992], 36n16), writes: “It is a little way . . . in the sense that it is based upon the nothingness of all creatures in the sight of God their Creator, and still more in the sight of God their Saviour, and that therefore, no independence or self-sufficiency can be allowed to creatures by Him Who holds in His hands all the graces they need for sanctification and salvation” (*The Spirituality of St. Thérèse: An Introduction*, trans. Philip E. Hallet [New York: P. J. Kenedy, 1950], 137).

As will become clear in this paper, Ulrich’s understanding of the little way is deeply metaphysical—indeed, we might say that Thérèse’s little way informs the *Gestalt* of Ulrich’s metaphysics of creation: that creatures, and being as such, are nothing before God. However, just as for Thérèse personally and spiritually, this does not entail a denigration of creatures, but an elevation, for in their nothingness they receive everything from God. Thérèse states, “since I have nothing, I shall receive everything from the good God” (*St. Thérèse of Lisieux: Her Last Conversations*, trans. John Clarke, O.C.D. [Washington, DC: ICS, 1977], 67). This is true of everything in creation! Balthasar writes that Thérèse “attaches tremendous importance to poverty” (*Two Sisters*, 246), as does Ulrich, though neither as simple self-abasement, but rather as a recognition of the real truth: that everything must be *given*, not grasped. Thus the attention Thérèse gives to poverty spiritually, Ulrich does so *metaphysically*. Poverty is the “way” of being: Thérèse states, “Hold nothing back: Distribute your goods as soon as you get them” (quoted in Rev. Thomas N. Naylor, *St. Thérèse of Lisieux, the Little Flower of Jesus* [New York, P. J. Kenedy, 1926], 310); in *HA*, Ulrich writes that “being holds nothing back” (62).

Balthasar states in *Two Sisters* that “the little way is the only way” (258), which seems an extraordinary claim, especially about a saint whom Rahner finds to be irritating and boring. Bernard Bro explains: “‘You are to love the Lord with all your strength, and your neighbor as much as yourself.’ This is the programme. And that anyone should have carried this programme out by such simple means has justifiably been hailed as one of the Holy Spirit’s practical jokes. In a word, God’s most exalted secrets for the world today hidden under the most commonplace of externals” (*Little Way*, 1).

This is what Ulrich recognizes—this is not only a spiritual rule, but a metaphysical one: that the most exalted secrets are hidden under the most commonplace of externals.

Here we cannot explore every aspect of what Ulrich means when he uses the phrase “the little way,” nor can we outline the entirety of how Ulrich’s thinking about matter and materiality informs his metaphysics.⁴ We can, however, approach this topic in Ulrich’s thinking through one particular implication of material being: accidents, or accidental being. Accidents do not subsist in themselves, but rather only in another—that is, substance—and as such, according to Ulrich, often get passed over in our thinking in favor of what we think of as more important subjects. And yet, in a certain sense, accidents are all we ever encounter in the world: while the tree could theoretically be any color at all, it must be *some* color—an accident—in order to exist and thus for us to encounter it. It is perhaps a paradox: we know that which is only through that which “is” not, in the strict sense of that word. To put it more simply: we know substance (and therefore being itself) only through accidents.

There is a corollary to reason’s little way, which both precedes and sets the pattern for it: this is the little way of being. *Esse creatum*, which Aquinas affirms as *completum et simplex*,⁵ can be known only in that which is not *completum et simplex*: that is, the substance. Substance is not simple, but it does *subsist*, and as such, it is here that we know being at all.⁶ Reason then follows being’s little way: we know being only through the accidents

⁴ For more on this generally, see my “Matter as Revelation of God’s Love,” *Communio* 49, no. 3 (2022): 507–26.

⁵ Aquinas, *De potentia*, q. 1, a. 1, corp. That *esse creatum* is *completum et simplex sed non subsistens* is central to Ulrich’s metaphysics of creation, and indeed though the secondary literature on this German philosopher’s work is just beginning, much of what has been written revolves around explaining its centrality. Oster takes up this point in *Mit-Mensch-Sein*, esp. on 209–85, as does Marine de la Tour in the whole of *Gabe im Anfang: Grundzüge des metaphysischen Denkens von Ferdinand Ulrich* (Munich: Kohlhammer, 2016), though esp. on 59–150. See also Oster, “Thinking Love at the Heart of Things: The Metaphysics of Being as Love in the Work of Ferdinand Ulrich,” trans. Adrian J. Walker, *Communio* 37, no. 4 (2010): 660–700; D. C. Schindler, *A Companion to Homo Abyssus* (Baltimore, MD: Humanum Academic Press, 2019), esp. ch. 2, “The Perfection of Being Manifest in the Finite Creature” (21–48); and my “Thinking the ‘Nothing’ of Being: Ferdinand Ulrich on Transnihilation,” *Communio* 46, no. (2019): 182–98. Probably the best summation of how central this is to Ulrich’s oeuvre comes from Martin Bieler who writes in his introduction to *HA* that “*esse est completum et simplex sed non subsistens*” is the “founding center” of Ulrich’s thought (xvii, though see, more extensively, xvii–xviii).

⁶ See *De potentia*, q. 3, a. 1, ad 12: “Since to be made terminates in beings it belongs properly to that to which it belongs *per se* to be, namely to a subsistent thing.” Or see *De veritate*, q. 27, a. 3, qa. 9: “To be created properly applies to subsisting things.” See also *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 45, aa. 4, 8.

of substance,⁷ which in turn subsists only because being itself, as Thomas points out constantly in his work, does not subsist.⁸ Reason's little way is then an image of the little way of *esse creatum*. One way to describe Ulrich's metaphysics of creation, then, is as a philosophical reflection on what it means that the gift of being is given in the seemingly insignificant, in what is most humble. And there is perhaps no subject in metaphysics treated as insignificantly as accidents.⁹

⁷ Ulrich writes in *HA*: "Just as the reason that is obedient to the necessary sense of being is, as ratio, always already *in via* amid the variety and multiplicity of beings, . . . so too the necessary sense of being opens reason up to the essence of the concrete entity only in and among the multiplicity of the accidents, in which the concrete subsistence of being reveals itself" (289). We will explain Ulrich's understanding and use of the necessary sense of being below, but the relevant point here is that Ulrich emphasizes throughout his work that being is only known only through accidents.

⁸ John F. Wippel writes: "Thomas stoutly resists any suggestion that *esse commune* subsists as such outside the mind apart from individual existents" (*The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000], 122). Earlier in the same section, Wippel recounts Thomas's arguments from *ST* I, q. 45, a. 5, ad 1, and *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG] II, ch. 52, explaining the difference between *esse commune* and *esse subsistens*: "Much less . . . is *esse commune* to be regarded as something which exists apart from individual existing things, except in the order of thought. If, Thomas concludes, God were to be identified with *esse commune*, then God too would exist only in the order of thought or in the intellect" (110–11).

⁹ A good deal of the Thomistic literature dedicated to accidents and accidental being has as its *telos* Thomas's understanding of transubstantiation (an excellent summary of that literature may be found in Fr. Philippe-Marie Margelidon, O.P., "Note à propos la séparabilité des accidents et la question de l'*esse* accidentel d'après saint Thomas d'Aquin," *Revue thomiste* 115 [2015]: 453–67), which may include some contemplation about what it means to know and understand being at all, but that is not its focus. Indeed, Wippel's masterful discussion of substance and accidents is ultimately pointed in the direction of understanding transubstantiation more fully, though this is not surprising given the attention Thomas himself gives to it (*Metaphysical Thought*, 253–65). Still, there are some articles and books that focus more particularly on the relationship between substance and accidents, most revolving around the question of whether Thomas understands there to be a real distinction between the *esse* of the substance and the *esse* of its accidents. For a summary of the position that there is a real distinction, we look to Joseph Owens, *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics* (Houston, TX: Center for Thomistic Studies, 2003), 159–60: "Quite evidently, accidental existence is distinct from substantial existence. Accidental existence is being in, substantial existence is not. In regard to real accidents this is a real distinction. . . . Only in real dependence upon substantial existence can the accidental existence be had. An identical existence could not be really dependent and really independent in the same respect. The one has to be really distinct from the other" (see 160–61 for Owens's entire discussion of accidents).

Accidents then could be the test case for whether we are following the little way, philosophically speaking. They are often forgotten in our philosophical and theological discussions, and yet accidents are in fact the only way we know being at all—the only way to begin to do philosophy in the

Francis McMahon and Gerald Phelan take opposite sides of the question in their discussion article, “The *Esse* of Accidents,” *New Scholasticism* 43 (1969): 143–48. McMahon holds that there is a real distinction, while Phelan contends there is not. McMahon holds the same position in a previous article, “Notes and Discussion: The *Esse* of Accidents” (with James Albertson dissenting), *Modern Schoolman* 31, no. 2 (1954), 125–32. Barry F. Brown follows and supports McMahon in his “Accidental ‘Esse’: A Confirmation,” *New Scholasticism* 44 (1970): 133–52. There he wonders if the language of the debate has not hurt the question itself: “We should give up talking about the *esse* of accidents, for this has not only proven in practice to be a misleading and unfruitful way of approaching the problem, but also is metaphysically imprecise according to St. Thomas himself” (134). Brown suggests that the question is better put thus: “Is the accidental being of a substance an *esse* or actuality really distinct from the substantial being by which that substance subsists? Or, on the contrary, is a thing’s accidental being simply its substantial being, considered under a different intelligibility, as ‘extended’ to its accidental modifications, so as to actuate not only the essence of the thing, but also its accidents?” (135). As noted above, Brown supports a real distinction, concluding: “Accidental being is distinct being because it is dependent; it is dependent because it is caused being. When St. Thomas says, therefore, that being is ‘attributed’ to accidents, he does not mean that the thing’s substantial being is attributed to them, nor does he mean that they do not really confer a distinct being on their subject. He means that in the strictest language, accidents can be said to have being only insofar as they are the formal principles by which their subject has distinct accidental being” (151). Brown follows this article with an entire book dedicated to the subject—*Accidental Being: A Study in the Metaphysics of St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: University Press of America, 1985)—wherein he reaches the same conclusion: “Accidents are actuated by their own being, which is really distinct from their essence and from the being and essence of their substance. Alternatively, from the point of view of substance, accidental being is a distinct being of the subject, limited by a really distinct accidental form or essence as the self-determination of that being” (281).

As noted above, both Phelan and Albertson take the position that Thomas does not distinguish between a substantial act of being and accidental *esse*. Albertson argues that “those things which unite to form an essence are said to form an *unum per se*, while those which unite to form something other than an essence are said to form an *unum per accidens*. According to this distinction accidents come under the head of those things which form an *unum per accidens*, for accidents clearly do not join with substance to form an essence. When accidents are joined to an essence they modify the being that has that essence, but they do not form a new essence by their union” (“The *Esse* of Accidents According to St. Thomas,” *Modern Schoolman* 30, no. 4 [1953]: 278). More recently, Philip L. Reynolds also objects to Brown’s conclusion on the grounds that “Brown considers Thomas on the definition of ‘some particular accident’ rather than on the definition of ‘accident *qua* accident’” (“*Per se* Accidents, Accidental

first place. However, this understanding of the importance of accidents gets distorted and indeed, we might even say lost, in the Enlightenment. Ulrich is not only aware of, but addresses how Enlightenment notions of knowledge and substance creep into our philosophy, and thus take us off the little way, so to speak. In what follows, we will outline (1) why accidents are integral to our understanding of being, (2) what happens to our conception of substance and accident in the Enlightenment, and (3) how Ulrich's emphasis on the little way helps us to do what Ulrich considers the task of philosophy: thinking about the world as it is given.

Accidents as the Way to Know Being

When speaking of the metaphysics of creation, especially one grounded in the Angelic Doctor's work, as Ulrich's is, it is helpful to keep the following in mind:

The distinction and multitude of things comes from the intention of the first agent, which is God. He brought things into being in order that his goodness might be communicated to creatures, and be represented by them; and because his goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, he produced many and diverse creatures. . . . For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided and hence the whole universe together participates the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better than any single creature whatever.¹⁰

In a certain sense, then, when we refer to or think of the being of creation, we simply *are* referencing distinction and multiplicity. That is to say, we can define creation, following Thomas, as that which is diverse and multiple while still being one because it participates as a whole in the absolute

Being and the Theology of the Eucharist in Thomas Aquinas," *Documenti e Studi Sulla Tradizione Filosofica Medievale* 13 [2002]: 193–230, at 193n2).

Ulrich does not comment directly on this discussion, but does seem to be aware of the question within Thomistic metaphysics and offers a conclusion in agreement with McMahon, Brown, and Wippel that there is a real distinction between accidental and substantial being, as will be explained below.

¹⁰ *ST* I, q. 47, a. 1, corp. See also *Compendium theologiae* I, ch. 72: ("Since the entire *esse* of things depends on God, . . . the cause of the plurality of things must be sought in God") and ch. 102 ("In other words, multiplicity and distinction do not occur in things by chance or accidentally, just as the production of things does not occur by chance or accidentally, but rather according to an end").

singular that is its Creator. The diversity of created being is enough to ponder: that there should be more than one type of thing within creation is already generous beyond measure (to say the same thing in a different way: that there is an-other to God, let alone many others), but that there should be multiplicity on top of that diversity—indeed that there should be seemingly infinite number of ways to be an oak tree, to be a frog, to be a human being—is entirely gratuitous.

This fact of multiplicity is evidence of creation's gratuity in many ways, not least because in it we see that the form or essence of the substance has been given seemingly infinite number of ways to attain its end in and through its material being. The seeming infinite diversity of creation is imaged in this corresponding infinity of multiplicity in each essence. And each is a sign of the infinite goodness of the Creator, which diversity and multiplicity represents, according to Thomas.

Multiplicity is an oft-ignored aspect of creation's participating in the divine goodness;¹¹ perhaps this is because of the humble origins of multiplicity: matter. Matter, the lowest rung, so to speak, on the ladder of being, is what allows forms to be multiple, and we meet multiplicity because we are part of material creation. Substances and their diversity within creation have garnered a great deal more attention, and perhaps that is because they are more worthy of it. But if we wish to say that creation is good, as Thomas and the Tradition clearly affirm, then we must do so all the way down, so to speak. Multiplicity is then not simply a fact with which we must contend because we live in a material world, but a phenomenon, as Thomas suggests, which images and participates in the divine goodness, and therefore can reveal something to us about the meaning of being, and specifically, being created.

Perhaps we have not paid multiplicity much attention because it is so easily taken for granted. Indeed, in a certain sense, we almost must do so in order to make any sense of the world. Walking in the woods, if one were

¹¹ Of course multiplicity itself has been on the mind of philosophers since Parmenides, who ultimately rejects its reality, but thinking about multiplicity has been, and continues to be, cast most often in the light of the problem of the One and the Many, rather than any revelation about the meaning of creation or being itself. Dionysius the Areopagite is the most notable exception here. He writes in *Celestial Hierarchy*: "So, then, forms, even those drawn from the lowliest matter, can be used, not unfittingly, with regard to heavenly being" (*Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheif [New York: Paulist Press, 1987], 144B). On Dionysius's influence on Thomas, see Fran O'Rourke's *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2005); on this point, see esp. 225–34. Ulrich too understands multiplicity to be evidence of creation's participation in the Good: "Multiplicity is brought forth from the abyss of being's bonitas" (*HA*, 81).

attentive to every single difference between each of the maple trees, one might never be able to recognize that these are indeed maple trees, that there is an intelligible form that connects all these multiple realities which allows one to see them for what they are, rather than a jumble of different colors or textures—when we know things, we recognize their form. But should we not take a moment and reflect on the awesome fact that we know form precisely in multiplicity? We do not have one real maple tree, and then decide to what degree other maple trees participate in the realness of that original; rather, in and through the multiplicity of all maple trees we begin to come to an understanding of what a maple tree is, the quiddity of maple tree.

Thomas emphasizes throughout his work that substance is the place, as it were, of being.¹² We meet being nowhere but in the substantial entity, for the substantial entity *subsists*: it possesses its own being. We often take for granted that we know substances by grasping their form. This is true, but if we jump simply from encountering a substance to knowing its substantial form, then we miss part of the process of what it means to know something, and as a result we do harm to the substance, and certainly to our knowledge of it. So we must pay attention to multiplicity, because that is how we know substance, and in knowing substance, we know being. And for all this, we must look at—and pay attention to—accidents.

Substance (and Accidents) in Enlightenment Thought

We post-moderns have been conditioned by the Enlightenment to ignore the accidents of being. In his splitting of the world between primary and secondary qualities,¹³ Galileo introduces a definitive division between the appearances of a thing and the really real, or the thing itself, and this division continues to haunt much of our thinking. For many reasons, but due in large part to his excising of final causality out of nature, Galileo asserts that “nature is the domain of mathematics,”¹⁴ meaning that nature is the domain

¹² Wippel writes that substance is “highest in its claim to being” (*Metaphysical Thought*, 80).

¹³ The move is not entirely unique to Galileo: Richard J. Blackwell notes that it was “originally suggested by Democritus and re-introduced by Galileo” (“Descartes’ Concept of Matter,” in *The Concept of Matter in Modern Philosophy*, ed. Ernan McMullin [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975], 65); given Ulrich’s critique, we will focus on Galileo’s understanding of the division.

¹⁴ Quoted in E. A. Burt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science* (New York: Dover, 2003), 75. Galileo’s division of the world into primary and secondary qualities for study, and its implications, has been extensively commented upon; Burt’s analysis does so with such clarity and economy that it cannot be bypassed—it is at this point

not of philosophy or metaphysics, but rather a mathematics conceived by Galileo only as external measurement (rather than, e.g., any Pythagorean or Greek understanding of mathematics governed by harmony). Only this kind of knowledge is real, according to Galileo; he refers to the “world of the senses” as “an unsolved cipher.”¹⁵ It must be solved by Galileo’s *logos*-less mathematics.¹⁶ The senses, according to Galileo, “do not give us the rational order which alone supply the *desired* explanation.”¹⁷ By “desired explanation,” Galileo means how and why things move or work, as he has no explanation for this once he rejects final causality. The desired explanation indeed *cannot* be anything that looks like a cause, but rather only mathematically descriptive.

In order to gain this desired explanation, Galileo proposes a method that begins with what he calls intuition: “Facing the world of sensible experience, we isolate and examine as fully as possible a certain typical phenomenon, in order first to intuit simple, absolute elements in terms of which the phenomenon can be most easily and completely translated into mathematical form,”¹⁸ he writes; then, in thought, there should be “a resolution of the sensed fact into such elements in quantitative combinations.”¹⁹ Elements, according to Galileo, “are a [thing’s] real constituents.” To know something is thus to break a thing down into pieces such that they are more easily put into quantitative combinations.

Before moving on, notice what occurs in Galileo’s understanding of what it means to know a thing: the thing being studied actually disappears. What Galileo proposes is breaking whatever it is down into its “real constituents,” its elements, and understanding how those things interact with their environment based on a mathematics built entirely around what Aristotle would call violent motion. But then the elements of the thing—whatever they are—actually become the object of study, not the thing itself.

a classic text on the subject. For more on this, see Hans Jonas, “Is God a Mathematician? The Meaning of Metabolism,” in *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press), 64–98; Michael Hanby, *No God, No Science: Theology, Cosmology, Biology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2013), esp. 16, 375–405 (ch. 9: “Saving the Appearances”); Ernan McMullin, “Introduction,” in *Concept of Matter*, (1–55, esp. 12–15).

¹⁵ Burt, *Metaphysical Foundations*, 78.

¹⁶ See Stratford Caldecott, *Beauty for Truth’s Sake: On the Re-enchantment of Education* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2009), for more on the ancient meaning of number in relation to *logos*, esp. 53–72 (ch. 3: “The Lost Wisdom of the World”).

¹⁷ Burt, *Metaphysical Foundations*, 79.

¹⁸ Quoted in Burt, *Metaphysical Foundations*, 81.

¹⁹ Burt, *Metaphysical Foundations*, 81.

Galileo supports his method by dividing the world into what he labels “primary” and “secondary” qualities. Primary qualities are, according to Galileo, absolute, objective, immutable, mathematical, and they constitute actual knowledge. Secondary qualities come from the sensible and are relative, fluctuating, and subjective, by which Galileo means, coming wholly from the subject rather than an actual property of the thing known. Galileo writes, “I think that tastes, odors, colors, etc. on the side of the object in which they *seem* to exist are nothing else than mere names, and hold their residence in the sensitive body.”²⁰ By sensible body, he means here the knower. Anything sensible, therefore, not only is untrustworthy, according to Galileo, but does not actually exist in the world itself.

Galileo’s division of the world into primary and secondary qualities, and the consequent Enlightenment uptake of this division, has done untold damage in many directions,²¹ but here it is enough to point out that what it means to know something and how we know something completely change from a Thomistic way of viewing reality or understanding creation, in which all knowledge begins with the senses, and substance is the place of being—it is in and through the substance that we understand reality.²² All knowledge flows from the encounter with the substance. Compare this to Galileo’s attempt to develop a method to gain access to the reality “underneath,” so to speak, our first subjectivistic impression of things. Galileo, and many Enlightenment thinkers that follow him, introduces a profound distrust of our own sensory experience of the world, and this leads to our searching—with a great deal of futility—for the really real, not understanding that we have been ignoring the really real the whole time. There is no need to search for it: the real is present to us, we just need to be attentive to it.²³

²⁰ Quoted in Burt, *Metaphysical Foundations*, 85.

²¹ Again, this has been written on extensively, but to name just a few, see Jonas, *Phenomenon of Life*; Hanby, *No God, No Science*; Charles de Koninck, *The Hollow Universe* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960); Simon Oliver, *Philosophy, God, and Motion* (London: Routledge, 2005); Alexander Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958); James Weisheipl, *Nature and Motion in the Middle Ages* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1985).

²² Here of course Thomas is following Aristotle, who writes in the *Ethics* that “the individual walks at the head of being” (1.4.1095b6).

²³ I do wonder if this explains the obsession in particle physics with finding ever-smaller sub-atomic particles: we think that if we can just split the most recent particle *one more time*, we will finally find the “really real,” finally find rock bottom, the foundation on which all of reality is built. But we will never find this rock bottom because matter is not the foundation of reality, but rather an infinite readiness to be informed (Dionysius writes that the “Good transcends everything, . . . its nature unconfirmed by form is

This division between primary and secondary qualities introduced by Galileo has certainly infected modern science—indeed, what we call modern science seems to be built on such a division—and this in turns means it has degraded quite drastically our understanding of what it means to know. And we seem to have let this division creep even into philosophy, applying an analogous division between substance and accidents. We think of substance as the really real, and accidents as happenstance, since their existence is dependent upon substance. It is as if dependence on another indicates to us non-importance, which could not be further from the truth. And occasionally it is almost as if, taking our cues from Galileo, we think that the accidents of a substance hide what is *really* there, and we must dig down deep to get to the substance. But this is not the true order or meaning of substance and accidents. Rather, substance is *only ever* communicated through accidents. We turn now to Ulrich to help us see this—and its perversion—more clearly.

The Little Way: Ulrich's Understanding of Accidents

In order to understand Ulrich's explanation for what happens to the modern Enlightenment understanding of being such that it comes to regard not being but matter—and matter incorrectly conceived—as the really real, we must first look at how Ulrich understands accidents, in order then to see with him what is at stake in our relegating them to the realm of unimportance, or worse, unreality.

Throughout *Homo Abyssus*, Ulrich makes it clear that accidents are the only path to understanding being—the little way of reason—because substance is only ever communicated by accidents. Or perhaps better put: accidents simply are the expression of the substance into the spatiotemporal world that creation is. If we attempt to bypass accidents in order to get to the really real, we miss the substance altogether and end up with what Ulrich calls a pseudo-substantial reality that we have made up in our minds, rather than an encounter with the actually subsisting reality, and therein being itself.

Perhaps the reader will object: Thomas writes in the *secunda secundae* of the *Summa theologiae* that “under the accidents lies hidden the substantial nature of reality,”²⁴ and this seems to point to Thomas's understanding of a hiddenness of substance, to which the knower must respond by searching

the creator of all form. . . . And one might even say nonbeing itself longs for the Good which is above all beings” [*Divine Names* 4.3, in *Complete Works*, 697A)]—thus, I suspect that the further down we look, so to speak, the more particles we will find.

²⁴ *ST* II-II, q. 8, a. 1.

for the substance or the really real, as we have been calling it. And it is true, accidents do in fact mediate reality to us, but not as intentionally obfuscating—rather in such a way that reveals the gratuity of what is given in essence: every substance is capable of achieving its final end in its own unique and unrepeatable way in and through the accidents.²⁵ This means that essence, in and through which every substance is enacted, can pursue its final end in a seemingly infinite number of ways. Accidents do not hide substantial reality such that we can never access substance. Rather the multiplicity of substances—which is possible only in accidents—reveals a kind of infinite fullness given to form.

If this seems somewhat abstract, we can think about it in terms of language, which Thomas himself gives us license to do: “Under the accidents lies hidden the substantial nature of reality, under the words lies hidden their meaning,”²⁶ he writes. Thomas is not here indicating that words obfuscate meaning, but that words *communicate* meaning—though there is a real distinction between the words and the meaning itself. However, the space given in the real distinction between words and their meaning is not a space of obscurity, but of creativity: in this space lies the infinity of expression of words. Thus, words are not primarily or rightfully used to belie, but to *reveal* meaning.²⁷ Accidents do not obfuscate substance; they reveal it, and insofar as they do this, they reveal being.

Picking up on this theme in Thomas, Ulrich writes that accidents are that “in which the essences of things affirms itself [*sic*] in a productive and expressive way.”²⁸ To be clear: it is not that the substance’s essence needs to affirm itself in order to gain reality,²⁹ but rather that the accidents allow

²⁵ Oster writes that, in accidents, “creatures therefore receive with the gift of being the possibility of participating in their own perfection” (*Mit-Mensch-Sein*, 270).

²⁶ *ST* II-II, q. 8, a. 1.

²⁷ It should be noted here that another of Ulrich’s books, *Logo-Tokos* (Freiburg: Johannes, 2003), centers on what it means that man is the bearer of the word. Just as accidents express substance, so too do words express the being of man (although not of course exhaustively, just as accidents do not exhaustively communicate their substance).

²⁸ Ulrich, *HA*, 14.

²⁹ That is to say, accidents are not simply identical to the essence or substance (see note 7 above). De la Tour summarizes the point nicely: “If [substance] is considered ‘finished’ or ‘obsolete’ in reality, then the liveliness of the mediation of substance and accidents disappears. This corresponds to the absolute dissociation between possibility and reality as well as to the dissociation between thing-in-itself and appearance, between phenomenon and intelligibility” (*Gabe im Anfang*, 214; see 213–16 for de la Tour’s whole discussion of substance and accidents). Martin Bieler also emphasizes the distinction between substance and accident according to Ulrich (following Thomas), though he highlights not just the distinction, but the significance of the mediation between

the fullness of the essence's actuality to come to expression in and through themselves—that is to say, there is a mediation, which can occur only with a real distinction. Think back to our maple trees: from the bare branches in the winter, to the yellow-green buds in the spring, to the burnt-orange leaves in the autumn, all of these are accidents, and all of these are included within the essence in a certain sense, otherwise they would not belong to the maple tree. All of these accidents are an expression of essence's actuality in the receptivity that is matter. And, since being really belongs most properly to the substance, and accidents are the only way to encounter any material substantial reality, it seems that the humble accident is what reveals being. Rather than needing to bypass what Galileo calls secondary qualities in order to understand reality, a true knowledge of creation would have us understand that the accident is precisely that in and through which being is revealed. The little way is thus the only way to know truly.

Multiplicity is not then a problem to be solved, or an annoying fact of material being, but a revelation of the meaning of creation itself, according to Ulrich. Accidents, he avers, reveal creation as good, because they reveal the gratuity of creation. "The existing essence," he writes, "does not abide in some place beyond the appearance; the substance claims itself in the accidents and is co-affirmed in them."³⁰ This is not, Ulrich is sure to mention, a mere extension of the essence into the accidents—there is a real distinction between essence and accidents, just as there is between words and meaning. Accidents are distinct from the essence, and yet the essence is given to express itself in and through that which it itself gives to be. This is what Ulrich means by "claiming and co-affirmation." Were, *mutatis mutandis*, substance to remain only in itself and not communicated through the accidents, then it would never be revealed as appetible (i.e., good), and therefore never be known.

Ulrich takes Thomas's understanding that being is *similitudo divinae bonitatis*³¹ to be axiomatic, and thus he refers often to what he calls the "necessary sense of being."³² Being's necessary sense, according to Ulrich, is revealed in

substance and accident: "The substance is not an erratic block that carries accidents as if they were threads glued on to itself, but remaining external to it, but internally bears the accidents and is inconceivable without them, just as accidents necessarily belong to man. We can easily see in what high esteem Thomas holds accidents by looking at the fact that for Thomas grace is an accident, and is in a certain way nobler than its bearer" (*Freiheit als Gabe: Ein schöpfungstheologischer Entwurf* [Freiburg: Herder, 1991], 356); see 356–58 for Bieler's discussion on the relationship between substance and accidents in Ulrich, particularly as it applies to human being and action.

³⁰ Ulrich, *HA*, 390.

³¹ *De potentia*, q. 7, 2, ad 9.

³² The *notwendige Sein-sinn*, or "necessary sense of being," according to Ulrich, is the

the good,³³ and the good, Thomas writes, “consists in that which perfects another as end.”³⁴ That substance reveals itself in and through accidents demonstrates for Ulrich that substance follows and reveals the necessary sense of being: “The necessary sense of being opens reason up to the essence of the concrete entity only in and among the multiplicity of accidents, in which the concrete substance of being reveals itself and in relation to which the dimension of the accidents . . . shows itself.”³⁵ The accidents reveal being, and most importantly, in the substance’s allowing itself to be communicated

way or path being must travel because it is directed by, and participation in, the Good. Ulrich’s preliminary explanation in *HA* reads, “The ‘sense of being’ can only express the fact that reason . . . experiences this being as a self-emptying nonbeing *next to* God, and that therefore being, although it is ‘the actuality of all acts and therefore the perfection of all perfections’ [*De pot.* q. 7, a. 2, ad 9], is nevertheless a *non subsistens*, that it does not subsist as *actus ultimus*, but is always already God—‘or’ creature” (*HA*, 24–25). D. C. Schindler puts it this way in his “Lexicon” for *HA*: “*Sinn* means ‘meaning,’ but also ‘direction,’ ‘mode,’ or ‘tenor.’ Most fundamentally, the Indo-Germanic root word *sin* means “way”: thus that which makes sense is a way that leads to an appropriate end. The phrase “necessary sense of being,” accordingly, indicates the direction of being’s ‘movement’; insofar as goodness has the *ratio finis*, the sense of being is designated by the ontological moment of bonicity. It is necessary in the sense of [inevitable]” (501–2). Schindler also touches on the necessary sense of being in his *Companion to Homo Abyssus* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2019): “The necessity, here, is due to there being no higher reference point, no actuality higher than being, which has as it were an intrinsic logic that is inalienable” (24). Though the *notwendige Sein-sinn* is a central aspect of Ulrich’s metaphysics of creation (he dedicates his entire fifth chapter to it [*HA*, 61–96]), since we are still at the very beginning of Ulrich scholarship, it has not yet been thematic in the work of any Ulrich scholars, including the three book-length treatments of Ulrich’s work in German: Bieler’s *Freiheit als Gabe*, Oster’s *Mit-Mensch-Sein*, and de la Tour’s *Gabe im Anfang*.

³³ Ulrich understands the act of creation, or being’s path to subsistence, to be marked by three moments (influenced, but not simply taken from, Gustav Siewerth [for more on this, see Bieler, *Freiheit als Gabe*, 261–265]): *idealität*, *realität*, and *bonität*, or “ideality,” “reality,” and “bonicity” in D. C. Schindler’s translation. Ulrich’s contention is that being does not simply stop at the moment of reality, but rather aims at and is directed by the moment of bonicity, or the Good. Thus, being’s necessary sense must come from the Good (see note 30 above). For more on the ontological moments in what Ulrich calls being’s movement into subsistence [*Subsistenzbewegung*], see Oster, *Mit-Mensch-Sein*, 261–74, and Schindler, *Companion to Homo Abyssus*, 21–48. Schindler writes: “The word ‘sense’ in the phrase ‘necessary sense of being’ [*notwendige Sein-sinn*] designates among other things the path that being travels, so to speak, which aims at bonicity” (24n8).

³⁴ *De veritate*, q. 21, a. 2.

³⁵ Ulrich, *HA*, 289.

by accidents, it simultaneously allows substances to perfect themselves, and as such, accidents reveal being as good.

Interestingly, Galileo-influenced Enlightenment thought, in its accepting of a division between so-called primary and secondary qualities, actually primarily obfuscates our vision of *substances*, rather than accidents. Ulrich points out that, if a substance were not to reveal itself in its accidents, if it were, as he puts it, to “resist coming to appearance and being externalized in the accidents, the only thing that remains is the self-enclosed substantial core as a thing-in-itself = x ; but sensibility, as the enabling dimension of the spirit’s self-enactment, gets cut off.”³⁶ In ignoring accidents, we actually ignore reality, meaning we will go down an endlessly futile path that really exists only in our own minds in search of this so-called reality.

Ulrich criticizes Galileo and Descartes directly³⁷ toward the end of *Homo Abyssus*, when he explores the perversion of our understanding of being when we apply what he calls “absolute definition and quantity” to being at every level. He begins the section by stating, “when ratio dominates, being gets posited next to the entity and wholly absorbed into the thinking subject.”³⁸ The desire to find the reality below the given reality—that is, the substance—the desire to find Galileo’s so-called primary qualities of nature, turns being into something the subject posits, which is the very result Galileo claims to want to avoid! By mistrusting the goodness of being, by mistrusting that being does indeed appear, by mistrusting that substance reveals itself in and through accidents, Galileo ends up with a picture of reality that should not in fact be trusted: one entirely in his own mind.

Ulrich points out that “it belongs to the essence of the corporeal natural thing that its accidents are not immediately related to its subject, but require the mediation of a first accident,”³⁹ and this first accident is dimensive quantity.⁴⁰

³⁶ Ulrich, *HA*, 371.

³⁷ Or at least as directly as Ulrich gets. Ulrich does not name Galileo and Descartes, but it is clear from his paraphrasing and summarizing that these are his intended interlocutors.

³⁸ Ulrich, *HA*, 420.

³⁹ Ulrich, *HA*, 420–21.

⁴⁰ Dimensive quantity, like accidents (see note 7 above) is another topic which Ulrich receives from Thomas and considers carefully, but seems either unaware of or indifferent to the broader Thomistic discussions about the topic. Most of these discussions center around whether dimensive quantity or matter is the principle of individuation. Ulrich addresses the issue by naming dimensive quantity the first accident of matter—so, both individuate, though matter primarily—but then moves on to what he understands the deeper meaning of the relationship between dimensive quantity and matter to be, and what happens when one confuses their ontological order. For

This Ulrich receives directly from Thomas.⁴¹ Ulrich explains that dimensive quantity is “the first disposition of the matter of the natural thing.”⁴² This first accident, which disposes matter to receive all forms, is then the first mediation of being, “even though,” writes Ulrich, “the substantial ground has its being precisely in, through, and with the emanation, export, and return mediation through the accidents.” Thus, it is “the ontological presence of being that makes possible the intelligibility of the accidents. The finite entity is positively affirmed; that is, it is ‘there’ in concrete subsistence only through, in and with the procession of the accidents in the moment of the bonum.”⁴³

When accidents get pushed aside, so to speak, in favor of searching for the really real, all we get is a distorted—and perhaps we could even say, perverted—sense of being. Ulrich writes that “the ‘definitive’ substance must necessarily seal itself off from the futile enactment of mediation through the accidents, or, what amounts to the same, must lose itself in the accidents in the never-ending process of futile self-affirmation.”⁴⁴ Put more simply, when we do not admit that the substance is communicated through the accidents and that being does reveal itself in multiplicity, we are left with a concept of substance which either is sealed up in itself, and therefore actually inaccessible to us, or does not exist. In the first case, we think we must then do violence⁴⁵ to the substance in order to access being; in the second, we begin

more on the Thomistic discussions about whether dimensive quantity or matter is the principle of individuation, see Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought*, 351–75, and Joseph Haggerty, “The Principle of Individuation According to St. Thomas Aquinas: An Interpretation in Embryo” (PhD diss., Boston College, 2015).

⁴¹ *ST* III, q. 77, a. 2.

⁴² Ulrich, *HA*, 420.

⁴³ Ulrich, *HA*, 421.

⁴⁴ Ulrich, *HA*, 421.

⁴⁵ Both Galileo and Francis Bacon use images of violence against nature to explain what scientific study of it is. Galileo writes: “I cannot find any bounds for my admiration how reason was able to in Aristarchus and Copernicus to commit such a rape upon their sense as, in despite thereof, to make herself mistress to their belief” (In *Dialogue on the Great World Systems*, trans. Thomas Salusbury [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953], 341). Hanby writes: “The Stillman Drake translation reissued in the *Modern Library Science* series edited by Gould (2001) renders the offending phrase, ‘*tanta violenza al sensa*’ as making ‘reason so conquer sense that, in defiance of the latter, the former became mistress of their belief’ (*No God, No Science*, 381). Although this is certainly legitimate and may be more technically correct, the metaphor of sense as an “unwilling mistress” of reason loses some of its rhetorical force and something of its philosophical importance as well” (39n31). In *The New Organon*, Bacon writes: “The secrets of nature reveal themselves better through harassments [*vexare*] applied by the arts than when they go their own way” (bk. 1, aphorism 98, ed. Lisa Jardine and

to believe being is not real. Ulrich writes that these “amount to the same” because, in both cases, the picture of being that emerges is unreal. And in both cases accidents are understood to obfuscate the substance in which they inhere, rather than communicate it.

Interestingly, when accidents are made into secondary qualities that must be bypassed to “get to” being, the substance itself is transposed into an accident: “Because no return to the essence from the external dimension—no *subsistere*—is possible, the substance has its home entirely in the accidental realm.”⁴⁶ Put shortly: when accidents are understood to be unimportant and not actually to reveal the nature of a thing, then what exactly would the “subsisting” of a substance mean? A substance *subsists*, meaning that it holds its own being; its being does not inhere in any other thing. But if we are constantly searching for the really real underneath the substance, if we think there is a sub-floor, so to speak, underneath the foundation that is substance itself, because surely these appearances we call accidents cannot actually reveal *being*, then we make the substance itself accidental. The substance dissolves before us in our “search” for nature.

We then substitute a concept of the ground that does not really exist: one which actually hides itself and which we must push past appearances in order to reach. “The substantial ground as detached reality,” writes Ulrich, “becomes ever more opaque in its isolation; it turns into the unknown ‘thing-in-itself.’”⁴⁷ Notice that Galileo’s starting point—that nature is obscure and we must apply mathematics in order to know it—then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy! Ulrich reminds us that, even in this misguided concept of substance, “the accidents nevertheless retain their ground in *quantitas dimensiva*. This dimension now stands forth in its ‘necessity.’”⁴⁸ Thus, dimensive quantity—which is itself an accident!—is now regarded as what is real, the only quality of a substance to which we can apply measurement. Appearances become “purely external” (as if such a thing exists), which, because “‘undetermined’ become the field of the ratio that is caught up in sensibility.”⁴⁹ In order then to determine if the appearances are anything resembling reality, we must measure and quantify them. But again here, the substance itself disappears! We no longer know the substance, but rather certain measurements or dimensions that can be applied to it. These

Michael Silverthorne [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000], 81). He uses similar language in *De Augmentis Scientiarum*, bk. 2, ch. 2, and *Parasceve*, aphorism 1.

⁴⁶ Ulrich, *HA*, 421.

⁴⁷ Ulrich, *HA*, 422.

⁴⁸ Ulrich, *HA*, 422.

⁴⁹ Ulrich, *HA*, 422.

measurements, which in reality can really apply only to this particular substance, then substitute for the substance's essence: we think knowledge of quantity or dimension means knowing the essence of a thing. And since knowing essence leads us to understanding being, knowing being now means knowing quantity. A strange transposition is thereby effected: we exchange being for matter, perverting our understanding of both. Ulrich concludes:

The circle thus closes once again. The medium in which the ratio operates is quantitatively dimensioned matter as the mediating dimension of the accident. The hypostasis of being implies not only the enfeebling of being into a concept, but also at the same time a collapse of the intellect into ratio in the medium of quantity. Quantity mediates the universality of the form into the individual emergence of the appearance and the individually posited reality back into the universality of form. . . . The *quantitas dimensiva* is itself the mediation of the universal and the particular as *continuum in discretionem*. Reason therefore cannot avoid entering into operation as understanding in its counting capacity, and here we discover the root of technologicistic thinking.⁵⁰

Any attempt to bypass accidents, then, ends up erasing substance—that which we set out to know in the first place—altogether.

Conclusion

In his book on St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *Two Sisters in Spirit*, Hans Urs von Balthasar writes that “the little way is the only way.”⁵¹ It is a striking sentence, especially written as it was twenty-seven years before the Little Flower was named a doctor of the Church. But perhaps the preceding explanation of Ulrich's understanding of the little way—not just as spiritual but as metaphysical direction—may help us to understand Balthasar's assertion. The little way, as Ulrich articulates and understands it, is the only way to know truly, because it is the little way that helps us to see and accept that being is only ever communicated in and through accidents—the seemingly insignificant. Ulrich helps us understand that the little way is not a diminution of reason, but precisely the path by which the human capacity to know is elevated: material being can know being itself in and through material

⁵⁰ Ulrich, *HA*, 422.

⁵¹ Von Balthasar, *Two Sisters*, 258.

being! The little way is thus not a pietistic overlay on Ulrich's metaphysics of creation due to a devotion to St. Thérèse of Lisieux, but rather, for Ulrich, the only way to approach understanding creation at all: only by accepting the humility of what it means to be created can we even begin to understand the generosity of creation, and therefore begin to see everything that creation really is. The little way of being and knowing is not then simply a guard against ego, though it is also that. It is a properly philosophic disposition: a recognition of being and meaning in everything, even to the smallest. Any other way of trying to grasp the meaning of being leads to a conceptual understanding of reality—that is, one that exists only in our own heads rather than knowledge that begins with an encounter with reality itself. N&V