

Thomistic Realism?

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To Each His Own Realism?

THE CLAIM to realism has existed from the first moment that human beings began to think. Everyone seeks to express the real. As Plato declared long ago, we must discover the “really real.” This holds true in differing ways for mythologies, religions, and philosophies. For philosophy, from Parmenides to Heidegger, from the most ethereal idealism to the most vulgar materialism: all denounce the shadows of the cave and call for a discovery of the *real*. Even modernity’s “subjective principle” with its hundred faces seeks to construct a more authentic reality. Nothing is more common, therefore, than being a realist. But the notion of realism is liable to confusion, equivocation, perhaps banality, and at least relativism. What relation is there between the “realism” of St. Augustine and that of Karl Marx?

The starting-point for our present investigation can be outlined as follows. In the history of human thought, “realism” is certainly a “relative” notion: why did St. Thomas choose this particular way of expressing “his” reality? But one must then bear witness to the universal value that makes his conception of the world relevant. The friend of wisdom cannot rest content with a historical slideshow of explanations, nor with a mere personal sympathy for a particular author, any more than with an argument from authority on behalf of a thought-system or a religious or aesthetic sentiment. Then why Thomas’s realism?

* Originally: “Le réalisme thomiste,” in *Thomistes, ou De l’actualité de saint Thomas d’Aquin* (Paris: Éditions Parole et Silence, 2003), 49–65. Translation by Thérèse Scarpelli Cory.

The *Kairos* of Thomas's Realism

Kairos is a theological concept which can be translated as "favorable time." In the Bible, it indicates one of God's important historical actions. By extension, the *kairos* of a thought-system can be viewed within a purely human context. For Thomas, the favorable time is one in which a concept is conjoined with being, grace, and understanding, in a juncture that directly results in Thomas's realist style. On the institutional level, thirteen centuries of intellectual and spiritual experience—longer if we include Greek thought—had established a place for theology within a real university of disciplines. Thomas's realism therefore belongs to a certain "theological science" which conceived of itself as a truly human science, but one "subordinate" to the science of God. The time was favorable for an objective investigation of the best intellectual conditions for expressing the real within Christian Revelation. Thomas's early discovery of Aristotle was decisive. But his genius lies in the way he employed this system of thought by adjusting it to a revelation which surpassed it. This realism must be verified by two lines of inquiry: Does it result in an adequate expression of Christian Revelation? And are its expanded concepts still philosophically relevant? For instance, when Thomas takes up the Aristotelian themes of "substance" in metaphysics, or "friendship" in morality, it is evident that he is nourishing his Aristotelian roots with Revelation in order to develop a deeper meaning which benefits both theology and philosophy. This is the *kairos* of Thomas: a philosophy that passes through the crucible of a revelation and that tends to be at once a theology and a philosophy. In a way that surpasses Aristotle, friendship attains the other in relation, under the influence of Christian charity and the Trinitarian relations; again, in a way that surpasses Aristotle, being is grounded in its existence, which is both autonomous in relation to God and dependent on him. Here we have a true theological reception of rational truth.

Everything Begins with Being

St. Thomas's realism is metaphysical. Being is the central core of his realism; being comes before any other consideration. Without being, there can be no thought. The "really real" is that which is self-subsistent: God, Infinite Being. The question of the "existence of God" manifests the unique way in which God exists. Here we have Thomas's famous philosophy of the "act of being." Taking up Aristotle's metaphysical pairs (act-potency, substance-accident, matter-form), Thomas re-grounds them in a conception of being and then of causality which is ultimately grounded in God. God is self-subsisting being, and He gives to every other being

an act of being befitting its own essence. Thus Thomas goes beyond Aristotle's substantialism, in which that which is real is substance. From the starting-point of this same substance, we arrive at an explanation of the fact of its existence, its ultimate "concreteness:" the act of being. In the light shed by the treatise on God and creation, Thomas discovers at the heart of reality a mysterious duality: *esse* and *essentia*. Every created being subsists through this composition, which structures reality and which is at once the source of its "existential" dependence on God (*esse*) and of its autonomy of being, as real possessor of an *esse* in a substantially realized *essentia*. The *esse* (to exist) is *aliud* (other) than the *essentia*, in a relation of act-potency. Since the ontological weight is on the side of act, the *esse* received from God is the most real reality. In God alone existence and essence are perfectly one. Substances find their ontological weight in the divinely caused act of being, which, although given, is really received by each being in the differentiation of essences. This kind of realism has never been a realism of Ideas; neither is it merely a substance realism; rather, this realism consists wholly in a balancing act in which the stability of the real truly exercises the act of being for itself, while continuously receiving it from God.

Meaning, Understanding, and Analogy

This "objective" realism of being corresponds to an epistemological realism. For Thomas, being determines knowledge, and not vice versa: the critical stance, so foundational to modern post-Kantian philosophy, does exist in Thomas, but only secondarily. First, being and understanding are perfectly identical in God alone. Thomas always describes knowledge in terms of a hierarchy of intellects: divine, angelic, human, each with its own mode of knowledge. The human being grasps being in a metaphysical judgment which unites being and essence, a "judgment of existence." This judgment is realist because human understanding has the capacity for decoding the analogical riches of being. While the act of being is perfectly accomplished only in God, it is also accomplished analogically in created beings according to the variety of essences. I can state the real judgment "Peter is good," both because I have experience of human goodness and because I know that goodness is perfectly realized in God. My judgment thus has a twofold foundation in experience and in God, a foundation which becomes even stronger if we consider the revealed given. The realism of human knowledge results from this capacity for knowing the ultimate reality of the real in its metaphysical structure. In this respect, Thomas's realism is a "moderate" realism, because being is attained in knowledge of *essentia* that can be conceived, while remaining

mysterious in the “act of being,” which cannot be conceptualized. Thomistic realism, whether philosophical or theological, can be summed up in its refusal to allow human understanding to reduce the existence—essence pair to essence alone. At the heart of the real is the ineradicable mystery of the act of being, where the deepest wealth of being is found, because it is “act.” Thomistic realism is thus constituted by an accurate grasp of the unity of *esse*, *essentia*, and *intelligere*. God Himself is pure “act of being” and therefore absolute *esse*, unable to be conceptualized, “known as unknown”: although He is perceived through His attributes, His heart remains mysterious and will remain so even after the Trinitarian Revelation. Here we find the foundations of apophatism, the silence about God—but a silence that knows why it is mute. Neither philosophy nor theology can be transformed into a gnosis or absolute system of knowledge. This limitation on human knowledge also serves as the condition for the truth of knowledge, which derives from the twofold status of the human intellect: its present, though contingent, earthly condition, and its essential union with a body. The human intellect is distinguished from the divine and angelic intellects by a realism anchored in that which all human knowledge presupposes: *sensible* reality. The human intellect, the weakest of intellects, can attain being only through the arduous procedure philosophy calls “abstraction.” Beginning from and in constant association with the sensible world, human understanding forms an idea. This idea can be accurate only within the balance of *essentia* and existence, when it departs from and returns to sensible experience, employing the senses and the imagination. Thomas would make this a major theme of his theology: knowledge of God’s existence is inaugurated by the recognition of sensible reality; the most fitting aspect of the Incarnation is the way in which the invisible God adapts himself to the hylomorphic structure, body and soul, of the human being, who needs to move from the visible to the invisible. The economy of the sacraments follows the same pattern of manifesting invisible grace by visible signs. The revelatory power of God thus confirms this realist epistemology. Human understanding is made fruitful with a sensible and spiritual knowledge.

Transition to Theology

An accusation often brought against Thomism is that its metaphysics plays too great a role in determining its theology. The accusation certainly applies to a particular kind of Scholasticism (though it must be admitted, not the most prominent kind). But Thomistic and non-Thomistic specialists alike now agree that Thomas did not fall into the trap of “onto-theology.”

Thomas's conception of God is not reduced to a narrow philosophical conception that makes God one being among many beings, for instance.

But does this accusation apply to Thomas's Christian theology? Is his theology not excessively encumbered by Aristotelian concepts or disconcertingly locked into medieval problems? Are Aristotle's logic and causality still defensible? On a more radical level, can we trust metaphysics?

These criticisms against Thomas's theology are often based on previous decisions concerning the relationship between philosophy and theology. For instance, some dream of a theology without philosophy. Others rush to embrace philosophies deemed more practical for the modern world, without always stopping to examine whether they are consistent with Christian Revelation. The question of using other philosophies besides Thomas's in Christian theology must, of course, always remain open. Yet we seek the philosophy most able to synergize with Christian Revelation.

In any case, for Thomas, the use of philosophy is not a "historical accident." If Thomas uses philosophy, and even this kind of philosophy, it is because it is the *sine qua non* of theological realism. In fact, the competence of theological discourse needs to be validated. Is theology truly able to attain a supernatural reality that largely surpasses the capacity of unaided human reason? Are we certain of declaring something true when we assert, for example, the divinity of Christ, the Trinity of divine Persons, the reality of the Eucharistic Presence? It is thus necessary to examine the "transition" from philosophical discourse to theological proposition.

For Thomas, theological discourse remains human. It is thus anchored in the metaphysical realism of the act of being. First of all, his metaphysics is intrinsically open to a deepening by Revelation. In fact, the act of being cannot be reduced to a concept. It is thus totally open to the mystery of existence, to the achievement of a possible perfection, to the occurrence of an unforeseen historical event.

Second, the doctrine of analogy opens human understanding to a grasp of the revealed mystery. When the theologian explains that "God is good," he proceeds from two considerations. On the one hand, he has experienced a goodness that is proportioned to his understanding, that is, the goodness of men. I know approximately what "God is good" signifies, because I also know that "Peter is good." On the other hand, the goodness of God and the goodness of Peter are obviously not the same. Peter achieves goodness only in an analogical way, on account of his human limitations and weaknesses. But in God, goodness is limitless, infinite. If all these specifications were purely conceptual, there would be a real danger of reducing the goodness of God to that of Peter. In fact, it is not enough to tack the adjective "infinite" onto goodness in order to attain God. For Thomas, the issue

concerns, not concepts or essences, but the act of being, the act of existing. Grasping Peter's goodness through a concept refers me to the act of being of Peter's goodness. Through analogy, I attain, not the essence of God's goodness, but the act of being of God's goodness (although I do so through concepts and judgments). Yet this divine act of being is mysterious at heart. I do grasp a little of the essence of God's goodness, but what really counts is the infinite depth of his act of being. Precisely at this point, supernatural Revelation intervenes by the free initiative of God, Who encounters the receptivity of an understanding formed in the mystery of the act of being.

The whole work of the philosopher and theologian is to maintain this balance, in relation to God and Revelation, between concept and existential openness, between *essentia* and *esse*, so that the fullness of Revelation can be received and attained, really attained. An immense advantage can be gained from this position: through analogy, understood in terms of the metaphysics of the act of being, I have connected my "worldly" language with my theological language. Peter's goodness is *really* my point of departure, my anchor in being, which allows me *really* to attain the goodness of God, while keeping myself open to the revealed datum. The transition is effected. In the judgment "Peter is good," I express the goodness of Peter while leaving an opening to the mystery of this goodness in its deepest reality. Similarly, in the judgment "God is good," I express the goodness of God while leaving an infinitely larger opening to the mystery of this goodness in its deepest reality. Thomas's realism is the go-between that travels between the metaphysical grasp of the act of being and the revealed datum that is received in faith, each of which stimulates the other to a great luminosity. Here philosophy is safe from its greatest danger, that of folding in on itself, and theology is kept from wandering "out of sight of the concept" into the illuminism that lurks on the borders of Revelation. At the heart of Thomas's realism lies this profound truth: it is the same God who creates being and who elevates by grace the spiritual part of the created being. The judgment "God is good" says something about the very substance of God; it opens a path for everything that the Revelation in Jesus Christ teaches about the goodness of God. My theological judgments are therefore guaranteed by the twofold support of my metaphysical judgments and the light of grace. Consequently, to say that God is three Persons is a judgment that really applies to the inmost being of God, as I will see it face to face one day.

The Other Theological Realisms

Naturally, however, we should investigate the "other" possible realisms in order to compare them with that of Thomas. We will consider a few examples.

First, the most tempting Christian realism is Christ himself. This thesis was proposed by the Protestant theologian Karl Barth. He rejected analogy and, influenced by Kant, the role accorded to causality. For him, there is no real knowledge of God except in Jesus Christ, and so all natural theology is effectively excluded. But Barth does not explain how this knowledge in Jesus Christ takes place within the dynamism of human knowledge. He merely says that the knowledge of the revealed God is of "another order." For him, it is enough to assert the experience of the event of Revelation and the renewal of all discourse through grace. Barth therefore constructs a theology limited to biblical concepts without really justifying how they attain the truth of that which they proclaim. Realism is safeguarded by the mere presence of the concept of "Christ," who is omnipresent in theological discourse. This position runs the serious risk of implicitly referring to an ideology of which its adherents are barely aware. Thus it is often apparent that even in the Christologies that reject the assistance of philosophy, a philosophy is clandestinely in operation, directing its theses. This position is therefore liable to Socrates' old accusation: the rejection of the philosopher is a philosophical position itself, and thus a contradiction. Moreover, if Christ deserves a central place, it seems strange that one would celebrate the Incarnation, God made man, while rejecting every reference to the cultural riches of the human being.

Second, the modern person tends to seek realism in the "scientific methods." Theology thus seeks its fortune within all the human sciences. But can theology search for the ultimate meaning of things primarily with the aid of a methodology borrowed from the empirical sciences? The attempt results in the transformation of theology into a mainly critical argument. This critique is necessitated by the obligation to verify constantly, as do the empirical sciences, the explicative "model" and its application to reality. Theological realism is forced into the mold of a *critical intelligibility* rather than being an *explicative intelligibility* of the real. The truth that expresses the being of things is displaced by verification, which seeks merely an ideal accord with the "model." While Thomas's realism does integrate criticism, it does so only secondarily. Criticism corrects possible deviations and safeguards positions: it does not provide the deepest understanding. In no way does it play the demiurgic role of reconciling the supposedly fractured subject and object; for in the beginning, understanding and being are already in communication.

Certain theologians, moreover, have shown how human reason in scientific methodology has established itself as a direct rival to God's omnipotence. The source of this modern deviation is located in a medieval dispute over the "omnipotence" of God. When omnipotence is

understood in a voluntaristic way as something which is outside the logic of a certain primacy of being, man can claim reason as his own and employ it first in the abstract efficacy of the mathematical model, then in the concreteness of technique. The moral consequences of this position are immense. Heidegger denounced the transformation of human reason into an "instrumental power." Instead of considering the real in terms of its deepest being, this "instrumental power" is interested in the real only as an instrument for unfolding the power of man. Thus the destruction of being follows a direct line of reasoning that leads from this old question on the omnipotence of God, passes through Descartes' ideal mathematics, and moves straight to Nietzsche's will to power. Theology should remember this fact whenever it makes use of the human sciences.

This deviation is not fatal, however. In any case, it proclaims the limits of the empirical sciences. As such, these sciences are not metaphysical. Therefore they could never attain the inmost core of being, much less that of grace.

Third, another source of realism could be "symbolic" language. Is not the symbol richer than the concept, and therefore more apt to attain the wholeness of Christian Revelation? It is arguably better-suited to fulfill this task, since it refers not merely to the intellectual order but to the affective dynamism of human existence. Man is drawn ever deeper into the symbol by his understanding, his will, his imagination.

St. Thomas's realism too goes beyond concepts to attain the act of being, the *esse*. But, unlike certain usages of the symbol, he does not need to have recourse to the notion that a voluntary order is at the very heart of knowledge as such. True, the wisdom of theological knowledge combines love and knowledge. Yet knowledge suffices to ground the realism of theological discourse. To attain God, it is not necessary to "symbolize" all human discourse. The "judgment of existence" expresses precise things about God without having to refer to human subjectivity and without having to relativize concepts by the symbolism deemed most effective. Moreover, in aiming toward something beyond concepts, the symbol always risks becoming a blind development of an understanding which, despite its value, is no longer really scientific because it has escaped the control of analogy.

These comparisons allow us to evaluate the solidity of Thomas's realism. His theological knowledge is real, but it still falls into the category of scientific knowledge. As such, it should not be allowed to arrogate to itself the whole of spiritual experience. Theology generally promotes the spiritual life, but it does not constitute in itself the supreme knowledge of God. Why? First of all, because this supreme knowledge of God is the beatific vision, an immediate, conceptless knowledge which takes place

only in another world and with the aid of another light. But also, here below, there exists a higher form of knowledge of God than scientific theological knowledge: namely, mystical knowledge. Although mystical knowledge is not exactly “more” real, it possesses an existentially more integral reality. In mystical knowledge, the Holy Spirit infuses graces for an intimate experience of God, always remaining within the domain of faith, but leading the believer to a communion of light and experiential love (according to very differing degrees of consciousness). Only here does the order of the will—the order of love—rightfully intervene. The mystics have attempted to express this essentially ineffable experience by means of a more dynamic wordplay which has a more supremely existential character, and therefore they use a “symbolic” style. Each type of experience must have its own language.

Finally, another example of realism could be that of “lived experience.” Does not our lived experience engage us in full reality? While metaphysics requires a certain detour, life itself is the meeting-place *par excellence* between God and man. It would be useful to develop a careful reflection on the realism of “lived experience.”

But in fact, “lived experience” is often an illusion, since it never appears in raw form outside a system of interpretation. The illusion consists in giving the impression that the realism of one’s own system of interpretation is precisely the realism of existence. Consequently, to insist that the realism of theological knowledge be rooted in lived experience is in fact to insist that theological knowledge depend, either on some particular type of lived experience (such as the mythical “man of today”), or on a more or less explicit interpretation of lived experience. In other words, it is to refer theological realism to an “interpreted experience,” and therefore to an abstraction. No matter how much this abstraction refers to the concrete, it is no less an abstraction—worse, an abstraction that it claims a universal value with the strength of fact itself. To use Thomas’s vocabulary, this position can be summarized as an immanentization of *esse* and *essentia* (and a reduced *esse*, at that), as though lived experience were its own proof of meaning.

St. Thomas would agree that it is necessary to attain concrete reality, but not without fully evaluating being. No creature has a lived experience that can be adequate to God. The sole lived experience adequate to theological realism is that of God’s *esse*. Human lived experience, no matter how rich it may be (such as that of the saints), is only the blossoming of a participation in the divine *esse*. In other words, to exist is prior to lived experience. Thomas’s metaphysics refuses to reduce *esse* to lived experience, not from a propensity for abstractions, but in order to attain the deepest *esse*, which shares its realism with everything. In the

judgment of existence (God is good), I attain a truly singular reality, but it has a twofold significance: that of the legitimate universality of *essentia*, scientifically recognized, a normal abstraction and identified as such; and that of the *esse*, really attained as the ultimate depth of the concretely existing thing. For instance, it is in connecting the lived existence of Jesus to His deepest *esse*, His divine Person subsisting in two natures, that I reach the fullness of the realism of its meaning, at once singular and universal, full of riches for all and for me personally in my lived existence, as the “existential communion” in the order of grace attests.

Why then does metaphysics so often give the impression of unreality? Again we can repeat: everything hangs on the balance between *esse* and *essentia*. This balance also explains the diversity among Thomists. But the philosopher can easily stray into inhabiting the conceptual order, sipping occasionally from reality in order to nourish the flow of his thoughts and to give them the appearance of truth. Such a philosopher allows himself to be dominated by a logic of essences: essentialism. Certain “existentialisms” react to this conceptualism. A surprising paradox can result: the reader who gets the impression that Thomas is straying “far from the concrete” may be reading his text through “essentialist” lenses and failing to consider the reality that is Thomas’s primary goal throughout his most rigorous arguments. Consequently, the accusation of abstractness really refers to the reader’s own deficient realism. Moreover, it is true that the metaphysical point of view is maintained only laboriously by the human intellect. It demands intellectual labor and above all a keen sense of the “depths of being.” This sense can be acquired through long experience, which is often gained very far from Thomism. Thus Thomism is not the only way of acquiring theological realism. Rather, Thomism is the precise speculative formulation of theological realism and provides realism with a foundation broad enough to support a restoration of the Christian mystery in its fullness.

The following point is crucial: if we are truly to attain being, man, Christ, and the Trinity, we must not reduce being to less than it is. Neither symbolized *esse*, nor modeled *esse*, nor existentialized *esse*, nor even Christologized *esse* are adequate means of expressing the depth of the Christian mystery. This fact becomes more evident when we consider the “fundamental judgments” in the lineage of the “act of being.”

Fundamental Judgments

A “fundamental judgment” is a metaphysical statement that makes possible major theological developments. It makes them possible, not in the manner of a deductive science, but by opening human discourse to the

reality manifested by Revelation. In the Thomistic tradition, referring to the treatise on creation, we can find two and sometimes three such judgments. They combine the act of being with causality.

First Fundamental Judgment: "God is the source of all being."

This first judgment expresses the foundational metaphysical position. God is the self-subsisting Being. He gives to all created being its "existing (*esse*).” The existence of God is thus unique and transcendent. God is *esse* in an act of being which surpasses whatever may be most accurately conceived about Him. One result of this plenitude is causation. God is "efficient cause." He causes being, *esse*, in creatures at the moment when He diversifies them into essences. Each created being exercises its act of existing according to its own nature. If all created beings are composed of existence and essence, gifts from God, they are therefore intelligible. Thomas's realism holds that the human intellect is capable of decoding the being of things (*capax entis*). As a result, the "first judgment" grounds the possibility of expressing the *truth* of things, and consequently all truth within the range of the human intellect, either through its own light or through the light of grace. This first judgment anchors human understanding in being, while opening it to the possibility of being deepened by Revelation. Here we find the foundation for theological truth as a whole and particularly its major division, dogmatic theology, which includes the Trinity, Christ, the sacraments, the Church.

To repeat: in this way, we avoid debasing these realities of the faith to the level of human conceptions. But *we do connect theological discourse to metaphysical realism*. In other words, we connect our religious experience to our "worldly" experience. Firmly grounded on this foundation, theological discourse can welcome and develop whatever is manifested in Christian Revelation—all the truths that are inaccessible to unaided reason or that it accesses only with difficulty.

Second Fundamental Judgment: "God is the Goodness of all being."

As "Act of Being," God is infinite Goodness. He bestows on all beings a participation in His goodness. In receiving being, all beings participate in the goodness of God, each according to its own nature. In particular, the human act of being good presents man with a personal history which he can realize according to his own free will.

While the first judgment grounded truth and dogma, the second fundamental judgment (God is "final cause" of all being) grounds the good and morality. Moral theology is possible because the communication of being is accompanied by a "dynamism," the presence of goodness

in all creatures, which strain toward God as their final end. Here again, Christian morality discovers its realism by connecting its revealed ethical discourse to the dynamism recognized in being. Just as in the case of truth, the transition from being to grace is achieved through analogy.

Generally, the teaching of theology rests on these two main judgments, which generate the major speculative disciplines, Dogma and Morality. One might ask—without wandering from the path of being—whether it might not be relevant to add a third fundamental judgment which is more or less implicit in the two preceding ones.

Third Fundamental Judgment: “God is the Beauty of all beings.”

The theme of beauty is woven prominently through theology. It originates first of all in Scripture and is often found in the Fathers. The theme of beauty is also validated in Thomas on at least two levels: first of all, Thomas states that God is not only the principle and end of all creatures (in technical language, their efficient and final cause), but also their “exemplary cause,” a notion he develops throughout his whole theology. Every created being receives being according to a certain “resemblance” to its Creator. Theology has developed the theme of the “vestiges” of the Trinity in every being, as well as the central anthropological theme of the “image” with respect to the human being.

Second, the viewpoint of beauty can be associated with a principle that appears frequently in Thomas’s theological argumentation: “fittingness.” Along with the rigorous reasoning of Aristotle’s logic, which syllogistically expresses the true and the good, Thomas uses arguments from fittingness. Such arguments introduce a specifically theological mode of reasoning. The argument from fittingness relates the mysteries of Revelation to each other according to explanations from “fittingness.” For instance, was it fitting that God should become incarnate? These “reasons of fittingness” enable us to deepen our understanding of the plan of God. By means of fittingness, Thomas establishes a more supple relationship between mysteries than can be achieved by the strictly logical necessity of a syllogistic conclusion. In so doing, he therefore clearly opens up another new path within realism. In fact, by examining that which is most mysterious in Revelation (was it fitting that God should create, save, glorify?), fittingness places theology at the heart of an *esse* that awaits fulfillment in our existence, salvation, and destiny. Fittingness enables us to ask about the experience of Revelation, since we know the answer and seek its relevance. Therefore, in Thomas, the primacy of being has a capacity for fittingness. Metaphysical realism is maintained when, beyond essence, one maintains the multiplicity of that which befits the *esse*. This

relationship is mysterious and is therefore open to all deepening of the mystery, especially the theological mystery. A particular luminosity, that of the beautiful, perhaps corresponds to this openness in the relationship of fittingness. Fittingness is in some way analogous to the beautiful, in terms of essence (the harmony of parts) as well as in terms of the act of being, in the mystery of a depth that is externalized according to the reciprocity of exemplarity. Thomas does not develop a “theological aesthetic” to exploit this possibility. But beauty, achieved through analogy, surely raises the realism of the true and the good to a greater theological awareness of the depth of the mystery.

Realism at the Heart of the Christian Mysteries

The metaphysics of the act of being is at the root of theological realism. We will now cite a few examples of its flowering at the very heart of the Christian mysteries.

The mystery of the Trinity gives Thomas the first opportunity to put his realism to good use. The history of the Trinitarian dogma shows how the expression of this mystery had to appeal to precise concepts such as substance, person, and relation. To express both absolute monotheism and the Trinity at the same time, the Tradition affirmed the formula, “One substance, three Persons.” These notions, gradually introduced and explained by the Fathers, would be decisively clarified by Thomas’s refinement of the metaphysics of being and relation. His doctrine is concerned as much with understanding the Trinitarian processions as with the work of the Trinity *ad extra*, as when he explains how the Trinitarian processions are the *raison d’être* of creatures, their structure, and their history, thus establishing an intimate link between Trinitarian life and human life.

The mystery of Creation is involved with Thomas’s realism in the highest degree. God, the Source, Goodness, and Beauty of every created being, acknowledged in the framework of the metaphysics of the act of being, grants a high stature to creation. This is manifested by at least three main considerations:

1. The consistency of created being: each being, in receiving the act of being “for his own,” possesses a real autonomy. This is true of the most humble beings such as matter, right up to the autonomy of spiritual beings, which takes the form of freedom. Creatures are not “appearances,” fallen spirits, or accidents of the supreme Being. They truly exercise their act of existing, fully and completely. When God speaks to man, He is truly conversing with someone.

2. The contingency of created being: the created, autonomous being is also revealed as not possessing in itself the absolute necessity of its existence. It is radically “non-necessary,” contingent. This contingency is best expressed when we understand that the *esse* of finite beings is dependent on the infinite *Esse*. Every created being hangs suspended from this gift. The distinction between essence and to-exist prevents us from transferring the ideal necessity of essences to existence. Although I am “necessarily” man, I exist fundamentally, as *esse*, only as suspended from the divine efficacy. My “lived existence,” strong with its own autonomy, easily forgets this fact, thus establishing a contradiction at the deepest level of its being: my autonomy cannot transform a received gift into the spoils of conquest. Conversely, dependence does not cancel out autonomy: it is precisely in dependence on God that creatures find the place for their autonomy. Revelation demonstrates this principle concretely in the themes of the Covenant, the Law, and grace.
3. The permanence of created being: finally, this received gift is not given in one isolated primordial instant. It is constantly maintained by the Creator according to his free will. The creaturely act of being depends at every instant on the permanent gift of God. It is from the starting-point of this fundamental gift of *esse* that God can consider his spiritual creatures, both human beings and angels, as serious “partners” and can increase his presence in them already on earth by the gift of grace, and by the gift of glory in Heaven hereafter.

The mystery of Revelation is primarily the concrete encounter between words and events in human history. The realism of our theological knowledge yields the key to the realism of the Holy Scriptures. One’s conception of being affects one’s comprehension on various levels of the realism of the Bible and its message. This in no way prejudices any of the elements that serious exegesis ought to study with respect to “literary genres.” Whether a “parable” of Jesus should be read differently from a “discourse” or a “narrative section,” it remains true that the ultimate meaning of any genre is inseparable from the understanding of being signified in the various forms. The metaphysics of the act of being thus enables us to appreciate the depth of the truth which is implied in the words and events of Salvation.

The mysteries of the Incarnation and Redemption: The climax of the covenant between God and his people is reached in the Incarnation of the Word. As in the case of the Trinity, the Christology of the first

centuries had to appeal to specific concepts to preserve the proper expression and transmission of the mystery. The result is a dogmatic formula pregnant with metaphysics: "One Person subsisting in two natures." The metaphysician needs all his vigilance here in order to maintain the equilibrium between the transcendence and the immanence of God. The identity of the one who presents a real human face demands the point of view of being in order to arrive, in theology, at an accurate idea of his divinity. Jesus Christ is true God and true man. The truth of this God and the truth of this man demand either that we possess an accurate conception of the God-being and the man-being, or that we remain silent about both. We must know them in terms of this relation of being. Jesus himself asks us to "understand" in the Spirit; and although this does not mean simply engaging in theology, when we *are* theologizing we must do so with an awareness of the realism presupposed therein. Thomas highlights the "realism of the Incarnation" against the background of the metaphysics expounded in the treatise on God and on creation. This enables him to understand not only the mystery of the person of Christ but also the efficacy of his action. For example, in treating the theme of the imitation of Christ, he says that Jesus is certainly a moral example of compassion and courage, but he is also a deeply "ontological exemplar": imitation is both exterior and interior, since every grace we receive passes through the humanity of Christ and configures us to him. Consequently, everything that Jesus did, said, underwent, or suffered in his existence is a source of grace. A daring parallelism follows: in the same way that God is cause of all being, Jesus, by His humanity, is cause of all grace. Thomas uses the same principles in discussing the death and Resurrection of the Lord.

The mystery of our sanctification: There is certainly a close correspondence between the "realism" of the mystic and the "realism" of the theologian who has recourse to metaphysics. The second fundamental judgment generates the realism of morality. It is significant that Thomas's morality is primarily oriented, not according to the inspiration of the Spirit, but according to the constitution of virtues in the ethical subject. This shows the degree of importance his morality accords to the significance of man and his freedom: man has a real capacity for becoming good by his own acts, by developing in himself the effective capacities for right action. For man, the realism of being is expressed in the realism of his nature, which eventually blossoms in the realism of grace. For sanctification, the realism of being appears in the role God has ordained for *human mediations*. No matter how imperfect and sinful man may be, God never hesitates to make him His collaborator in the work

of salvation. Because God really gives grace, and because grace is a reality in man, God also gives man the power to transmit it, as life and truth, within an ecclesial community. There is a hierarchical structure and above all a communion of love in which every being indwelt by grace becomes, visibly or invisibly, the source of spiritual goods for others. So that these exchanges may be possible on a supernatural level, grace must bring to full completion a “nature,” a being with a true ontological weight. The communication and mediation of grace find their clearest realism in *sacramental efficacy*. God transmits His invisible grace by visible signs, an interplay that is already present in the knowledge of being when knowledge draws its realism from the sensible world and abstracts therefrom its spiritual meaning. It is not surprising that Thomas’s realism is best expressed in the mystery of the *presence of Christ in the Eucharist*. By means of the concept of “transubstantiation,” Thomas explains, not the mystery, but its possibility, and how to express it in its integrality. We cannot understand this doctrine if we ignore the meaning of metaphysical principles such as “substance,” “accidents,” and above all *esse*. This realism is established in the final theological unfolding of the metaphysics of *esse* when Thomas, with the Church, conceives of the end of all sanctified life: *the vision of God in glory*. The realism of grace is continued in the life of Heaven. The knowledge of God face to face is made possible by a new created gift, which elevates the human faculties to the level of this intimacy with God. This gift is the *light of glory*. As with the *light of grace* in faith, the *light of glory* establishes a new capacity, freely given and really introduced into the person who benefits from it.

One could meditate for a long time on the encounter in which the Thomistic realism of *esse* meets the realism of the Eucharistic presence and the grace that blossoms from faith into vision. At this summit, God makes himself present in his incarnate Word to the world and to the human heart. The metaphysics of *esse* facilitates the best expression of this reality embracing the whole economy of salvation: does not this fact supremely validate the theological relevance of Thomas’s realism? **N.V**