

The Metaphysician at Prayer: Thomas Aquinas on Metaphysics and Prayer as “Interpreters of Desire”

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TERTULLIAN FAMOUSLY ASKS, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”¹ Of course, Tertullian’s question can be understood as follows: “What has philosophy (Athens) to do with revealed theology (Jerusalem)?” Let us further specify this question. It is uncontroversial that these ancient cities are intimately, though not exclusively, associated with two important developments in Western civilization: Athens with metaphysics and Jerusalem with Judeo-Christian revelation. As Aristotle says, all men desire to know, and upon knowing a thing they desire to know its cause; metaphysics is the philosophical completion of this natural human response to the realities that confront human agents in everyday life. On the other side of the Mediterranean, Judeo-Christian prayer is the divinely inspired human reaction to the revelation of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. With this in mind, I would like to reframe our question as follows: What has metaphysics to do with Christian prayer? What has the Academy to do with the Temple?

We can enumerate at least three responses to this question. First, one might dismiss the question as a misguided, overly academic (or overly Scholastic) endeavor with no significant connection to the lived reality of Christian experience. One could argue that the image of St. Therese of Lisieux kneeling piously in prayer does not seem intimately connected to

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2014 Dominican Colloquium “What Has Athens to Do with Jerusalem? Dialogue between Philosophy and Theology in the 21st Century,” organized by the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology in Berkeley.

the triumphant depictions of Aristotle disputing metaphysical questions in the Lyceum. On this view, the answer to the question “what has metaphysics to do with Christian prayer?” would be: “Not much, or nothing at all.” In fact, one might even see the two as opposed to each other, with metaphysics seen as a temptation to intellectual pride and prayer as the embodiment of Christian humility.

A second and more sophisticated response would be to show that both metaphysics and prayer are involved with truth. Metaphysics is concerned with the truth about being; Aristotle identifies being-as-the-true as one of the *per se* senses of being,² and ultimately metaphysics reaches toward the truth concerning the being of the First Cause. For its part, Christian prayer is grounded on the truth of a personal God who teaches us how to pray and initiates and sustains our own prayers, all while perfecting our freedom, not destroying it. The issue of truth as a connection between metaphysics and prayer is interesting and worth pursuing; it would be instructive to compare Aristotle’s claim that a prayer is not an instance of a truth-bearing statement with the Christian doctrine of prayer as a graced response to the God who reveals himself as First Truth Speaking.³

In this essay, we will pursue a third avenue in response to the question of the relationship between metaphysics and prayer. We will argue that Thomas Aquinas’s understanding of human desire, both natural and supernatural, provides a window through which one can see the connection between the activities of metaphysics and prayer. We will also show that themes in phenomenology and Robert Sokolowski’s “theology of disclosure” shed further light on the relationship between metaphysics and prayer and complement Aquinas’s teaching. Therefore, this essay will unfold in two main sections.

In the first section, we will discuss Aquinas’s metaphysics and his use of metaphysical principles in speculative theology. This section will unfold in three subsections. The first subsection will discuss the metaphysical principles that underlie Aquinas’s notion of desire. According to Aquinas, form gives being (*forma dat esse*), and, immediately connected with this principle, form gives inclinations to the operations proper to the mode of being of each entity. The second subsection will show how these principles apply in the supernatural order, and the third subsection will discuss some

² Aristotle enumerates the four senses of being at *Metaphysics* 5.7 and 6.2. For a discussion of Aristotle’s sense of being as the true, see my article “Speech and Being in Aristotle,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2017): 31–41.

³ For Aristotle’s claim that a prayer is a *logos* that is neither true nor false, see *Peri hermeneias* 17a3–5.

similarities and differences between metaphysics and prayer understood as “interpreters” of desire.

The second part of the essay complements Aquinas’s thought and will unfold in two subsections. In the first subsection, we will discuss two points from phenomenology, namely the importance of making distinctions and the way that objects are given to us in perception and thinking as unities within manifolds of appearances. In the second subsection, we will develop these phenomenological points and, drawing upon Sokolowski’s theology of disclosure, apply them to the issues of metaphysics and prayer.

Aquinas’s Metaphysics of Form, Inclination, and Operation

Forma Dat Esse et Forma Dat Inclinationem

Aquinas frequently relies on the principle that form gives being. Basing himself on Aristotle, Aquinas argues that form is essentially act, and therefore it makes the thing that possesses some form to be in some way.⁴ Aquinas says: “A thing is one, according as it is a being. Now the form, through itself, makes a thing to be actual since it is itself essentially an act.”⁵ Lawrence Dewan maintains that there is a real distinction between form and *esse* in all created realities, but he says that, according to St. Thomas, there is an “almost-identity” of form and *esse*. Concerning substances composed of matter and form, Dewan says: “Form is the factor through which the matter comes to participate in being. Form is thus very close in nature (or ontological character) to what we call ‘*esse*.’ Indeed, form and being are *indissociable*; being follows upon or necessarily accompanies form, just because of the kind of thing form is.”⁶ We can therefore say that the form, or *eidos*, of an entity is altogether “at work” and that the *eidos* of a thing can be described as *energeia* (“at work”), unifying the entity and making it to be.⁷

⁴ For the Platonic background of this idea, see Plato, *Phaedo* 100c–107b. In this subsection, we are speaking of substantial forms and therefore substantial being, but on Aquinas’s account even accidental forms give being; they modify the substance in which they inhere.

⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* [ST] I, q. 76, a. 7, resp.: “quia sic dicitur aliquid unum, quomodo et ens. Forma autem per seipsam facit rem esse in actu, cum per essentiam suam sit actus.” See also ST I, q. 14, a. 2, ad 1.

⁶ Lawrence Dewan, *Form and Being: Studies in Thomistic Metaphysics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 198.

⁷ See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 9.8.1050a21–23. For the language of the *eidos* of an entity being “at work,” see Jacob Klein, “Aristotle, an Introduction,” in *Lectures and Essays*, ed. Robert B. Williamson and Elliot Zuckerman (Annapolis, MD: St. John’s College Press, 1985), 175–78.

Form, precisely as the metaphysical principle that activates or gives being to an entity, is described by Aquinas as “something divine, best and desirable”:

[Form] is divine because every form is a certain participation in the likeness of the divine being, which is pure act [*omnis forma est quaedam participatio similitudinis divini esse, quod est actus purus*]. For each thing, insofar as it is in act, has form. Form is best because act is the perfection of potency and is its good; and it follows as a consequence of this that form is desirable, because every thing desires its own perfection.⁸

Form is by its very nature active and thus gives being to entities, and precisely because of this “ontological character” it is understood as something divine, as a participation of the Divine being, which is pure act and highest in the realm of form. Further, Aquinas presents form as giving being, unity, and *species*. The form does not only give being in a merely “formal” sense, but rather makes the thing to be a unified instance of *this kind of thing*. Aquinas says succinctly, “Form gives being and species,”⁹ and he also quotes Aristotle that the form is the source of the “difference” of each entity.¹⁰ The form activates the entity and makes it to be at work being the kind of thing that it is.

Aquinas also distinguishes two kinds of act that are associated with the form of an entity, first and second: “Act [*actus*], however, is twofold; first, and second. The first act is the form and integrity of a thing; the second act is its operation.”¹¹ Thus, the form of an entity (its substantial form) “gives it its ‘to be’ [*esse*],” activating it as a unified whole of a given kind. The form is the “first act” of an entity, giving it its unity and integrity, and also inclining it to its proper operations, or “second acts.” A substantial form not only energizes its correlative matter and unifies the entity as one reality of a specific kind, but also expresses itself or flows forth into the inclinations toward the proper operations and end(s) of that entity.¹² Aquinas says, “Every entity is naturally inclined toward operation that is fitting for it according to its form [*operationem sibi convenientem secundum*

⁸ Aquinas, *In I phys.*, lec. 15, no. 135 (translation mine). For Aristotle’s claim that form is something divine in things, see *Physics* 1.9.192a17–19.

⁹ Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de anima*, q. unic., a. 10, resp.

¹⁰ *ST* I, q. 76, a. 1, resp.

¹¹ *ST* q. 48, a. 5, resp. See also *ST*, I, q. 105, a. 5.

¹² See *ST* I, q. 80, a. 1, resp. Aquinas says, “Some inclination follows every form.”

suam formam].”¹³ According to St. Thomas, it is precisely in seeking their own natural ends as the perfection of their substantial forms that created entities seek God as the final cause of creation. Aquinas says: “It does not belong to the First Agent, who is agent only, to act for the acquisition of some end; he intends only to communicate his perfection, which is his goodness; while every creature intends to *acquire its own perfection*, which is the likeness of the divine perfection and goodness. Therefore the divine goodness is the end of all things.”¹⁴ Aquinas displays God as the end (*finis*) or the final cause (*causa finalis*) of all created entities, but God, who is *ipsum esse subsistens*, does not act so as to achieve an end he does not possess.

It is therefore the form of an entity that shapes its matter toward the perfection (end or *finis*) of the entity as a unified whole. By showing the form as the energizing source of the inclinations characteristic of an entity, Aquinas intimately links the substantial form with the *nature* of an entity. Commenting on Aristotle, Aquinas says that no natural substance has a nature except insofar as it has a substantial form, for “Primarily and properly what is called nature is the substance, that is the form (*forma*) of those things which have within themselves as such the source of their motion. For matter is called nature because it is receptive of form; and generations [*generationes*] get the name of nature because they are motions proceeding from a form and also toward forms [*et iterum ad formas*].”¹⁵ We should not construe this point in a Cartesian manner; Aquinas says that in natural substances composed of both matter and form, the matter enters into the essence of the thing. The entity is one unified being, and the matter and form are the potency and activity of one unified entity. The matter is the actualized potency, the material cause,¹⁶ and the unity between the matter and form is immediate.¹⁷ However, Aquinas follows Aristotle in saying the form is “more a being” than the matter,¹⁸ and Aquinas concludes that the form is also “more the nature” than the matter.¹⁹

¹³ ST I-II, q. 94, a. 3, resp.

¹⁴ ST I, q. 44, a. 4, resp. (emphasis added).

¹⁵ In V *metaph.*, lec. 5, no. 826 (translation mine).

¹⁶ See ST I, q. 75, a. 4; In VII *metaph.*, lec. 9, nos. 1467–1469. See also: Aristotle, *Physics* 2.2193b31–94a15; *Metaphysics* 6.1.1025b28–26a7.

¹⁷ See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 8.6.1045a7–b23.

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 7.2.1029a5–6.

¹⁹ See Aquinas, In VII *metaph.*, lec. 11, nos. 1525–27; In V *metaph.*, lec. 5, no. 826; In II *phys.*, lec. 1525–57. Here we might recall Aristotle’s insistence that form is something divine in things and that matter “desires” the form; see *Physics* 1.9.192a17–19.

Aquinas therefore shows that the *form* energizes an entity and in so doing acts as a springboard to the operations and perfections characteristic of each entity. Aquinas also understands the *nature* of a thing in a similar way. He follows Aristotle's definition of nature as "a principle or cause of being moved and of being at rest in that to which it belongs primarily, in virtue of itself and not accidentally."²⁰ In the *De ente et essentia*, Aquinas says: "The philosopher too says in *Metaphysics* V that every substance is a nature. But the word nature taken in this way appears to signify the essence of an entity according as it has an ordering to the entity's proper operation, since no entity is deprived of its proper operation."²¹ John O'Callaghan highlights this Thomistic understanding of nature by pointing out that "a root meaning of 'nature' (in St. Thomas's Latin '*natura*') is *to be destined by birth toward a goal*."²² With O'Callaghan's insight, we now have an important nexus of ideas clustering around the role of form in Aquinas's metaphysics. Aquinas places creaturely formal causality within the setting of God's efficient causality of *esse*, and he stresses the fact that formal causality, itself caused by God, gives rise to the characteristic operations and movements of an entity. A substantial form energizes, unifies, and specifies an entity; further, it imparts inclinations to the proper operations that achieve the ends of the entity. Because the form gives the entity its inclinations to its proper end, the form is closely connected to the nature of the entity; the entity is tilted toward certain activities by its form. The key is to understand the form of an entity as closely linked with its nature, and then to see the form-nature as inclining the entity to its fitting end, or its proper perfection. For Aquinas, the formal cause and the final cause of an entity are inseparable, and although metaphysics studies every kind of cause, formal and final causality are given special attention in first philosophy.²³

In connection with these points, Aquinas presents God as the creator of a hierarchy of natures, and in virtue of the Divine Wisdom and the Divine Will, each nature is inclined to the good in the mode proper to that created nature.²⁴ Aquinas therefore describes reality as infused with

²⁰ Aristotle, *Physics*, 2.1.192b21–23.

²¹ *De ente et essentia*, ch. 1, no. 10 (translation mine).

²² John O'Callaghan, "Creation, Human Dignity, and the Virtues of Acknowledged Dependence," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 1 (2003): 109–40, at 124. O'Callaghan is citing a definition of *natura* given in Roy J. Deferrari, *A Latin English Dictionary of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1986), 678. See also, C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 25.

²³ See *In XI metaph.*, lec. 1, no. 2157.

²⁴ See *ST* I, q. 44, a. 4; I, q. 65, a. 2; I, q. 103, a. 1; I-II, q. 26, a. 1.

inclination toward the good, and every entity, through its form, has its proper inclination toward operations that achieve its perfection. In the realm of human nature, the form of the human person is the intellectual, immaterial soul, as Aquinas argues:

For the nature of each thing is shown by its operation. Now the proper operation of man as man is to understand; because he thereby surpasses all other animals. Whence Aristotle concludes (*Ethic.* 10.7) that the ultimate happiness of man must consist in this operation as properly belonging to him. Man must therefore derive his species from that which is the principle of this operation. But the species of anything is derived from its form. It follows therefore that the intellectual principle is the proper form of man.²⁵

We should notice that in the order of being, the form has primacy because it activates the entity and is the source of the inclinations and operations characteristic of that entity. However, in the order of discovery, the characteristic operations or activities of the entity have priority, since they are first for us and manifest the nature, or form, of the entity.²⁶ In the case of man, the operation most proper to the human person, or we could say the most characteristic “second act” stemming from the human form, is to understand (*intelligere*).

This intellectual cognition in human beings is also the source of the inclination proper to man, which is an intellectual inclination following upon the operation of the human intellect, especially as comprehending the very idea or *ratio* of being and the good.²⁷ This mode of inclination in the human person is that of *will*, the intellectual appetite following upon intellectual apprehension. Aquinas argues that, although the will is an agent cause with respect to the intellect and moves it to its proper act of thinking and understanding, there is no movement of the human will unless the intellect first perceives some good and “presents” it to the will as the will’s proper object.²⁸ Aquinas says that “cognition naturally precedes desire,”²⁹ and he claims that “every movement of the will must be preceded by apprehension, whereas every apprehension is not preceded by an act of

²⁵ *ST* I, q. 76, a. 1, resp.

²⁶ On the order of being as distinct from the order of discovery, see Aristotle, *Physics* 1.1.184a15–21.

²⁷ See *ST* I, q. 59, a. 1.

²⁸ See *ST* I, q. 82, a. 4.

²⁹ *ST* I, q. 16, a. 4, resp.

the will.”³⁰ The human soul, through its proper operation of understanding, is the source of the natural human inclinations to truth and virtue. Aquinas says, “Since the rational soul is the proper form of man, every man has a natural inclination toward acting in accord with reason, which is just to act in accord with virtue.”³¹

We have highlighted the role of form in general and of human form in particular, and we can now specify our reflections to show that metaphysics is a perfection of the human desire for truth. To this end, we must discuss *the correlation* between the human operation of understanding and the forms of objects understood. According to Aristotle and St. Thomas, an entity is intelligible only insofar as it is actualized by its form.³² Aquinas says:

As *Metaphysics* 9 says, each thing is such that there can be cognition of it insofar as it is actual and not insofar as it is potential. For something is a being and is true, i.e., falls under cognition, insofar as it is actual. This is manifestly clear as regards sensible things; for instance, the power of seeing perceives only what is actually colored and not what is potentially colored. Similarly, it is clear that insofar as the intellect has cognition of material things, it has cognition only of what is actual; and so, as *Physics* 1 says, the intellect does not have cognition of primary matter except in relation to form.³³

Aquinas concludes that the form of an entity is the source of its intelligibility precisely because it is the source of its being, such that human agents gather knowledge from “*the forms* of sensible and material things.”³⁴ On this point, Stephen Brock claims that “Aristotle and Thomas regard being cognizable as a genuine feature of things, despite its being actualized only in a few special kinds of things (partially in beasts, and fully in man).”³⁵ Aquinas argues that truth can be said to be “in things” insofar as they are the cause of truth expressed in human thinking and speech.³⁶ Thus, for St. Thomas, the actualization of the human intellect when it knows entities, its operation of understanding something, “is itself attributed to things

³⁰ *ST* I, q. 82, a. 4, ad 3.

³¹ *ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 3, resp.

³² See *ST* I, q. 87, a. 3.

³³ *ST* I, q. 87, a. 1.

³⁴ *ST* I, q. 84, a. 4, ad 1.

³⁵ Stephen L. Brock, *The Philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas: A Sketch* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 68.

³⁶ See *In I peri herm.*, lec. 7, no. 3.

[known], even though it does not inhere in them. It is their act of being cognized.”³⁷ Clearly, the existence of things does not depend upon their being cognized by human agents; rather, the act of human cognition is in some way the effect of things. They are said to be the cause of truth for us. As Brock says, in the act of human cognition, things “manifest themselves or present themselves” to the human knower.³⁸ Brock concludes that Aquinas conceives of human cognition as “a kind of union with the things, a *joint activity* of subject and object.”³⁹ Human knowing, as the “*joint activity* of subject and object,” is achieved when the form of man, the rational soul, through its characteristic operation of understanding makes intellectual contact with the source of being and intelligibility of things, namely their forms.

Given this understanding of the correlation between the human knower and the being of things, Dewan argues that there is a nascent insight into formal causality inherent in our intellectual grasp of the natures of things that we encounter, and therefore there is an incipient understanding of causal dependence. To see this point, we can consider the proposition often employed by Aquinas that “an effect depends upon its cause.”⁴⁰ Commenting on this principle of causality, Aquinas says: “It is necessary that an effect depend on its cause. For this belongs to the notion of effect and cause, which manifestly appears in formal and material causes. For, any material or formal principle being subtracted, the thing immediately ceases to be, because such principles enter into the essence of the thing.”⁴¹ Because human cognition puts us in touch with the being of entities, it provides the “raw materials” for the more complete and more perfect knowledge of being achieved through the philosophical reflection that takes place in metaphysics. The crucial point is that in grasping the form of an object, or in knowing what the thing is, the human mind acquires some vague notion of the thing as actualized by its form. Such knowledge appears, in the order of discovery, by way of the thing’s proper operations, which manifest its nature.⁴² For example, upon seeing an animal move, we know that it is alive; upon hearing it speak coherently, we see that it is human, that it is alive as the kind of thing that can engage in intelligent

³⁷ Brock, *Philosophy of Saint Thomas*, 68.

³⁸ Brock, *Philosophy of Saint Thomas*, 68.

³⁹ Brock, *Philosophy of Saint Thomas*, 90–91. Emphasis original. Aquinas, following Aristotle, describes the human soul as “that which is in a way all things”; see, for example, *ST I*, q. 84, a. 2, ad 2.

⁴⁰ See this causal principle employed at *ST I*, q. 2, a. 2.

⁴¹ *De potentia*, q. 5, a. 1, resp.

⁴² We discussed this point above; see *ST I*, q. 76, a. 1, resp.

operations. When we reflect on such experience philosophically, we can see the entity itself as an effect of its form (and matter) and its operations as displaying its nature. Dewan says, "To say that an effect depends on its cause is first of all to say that the being of a thing depends on its form."⁴³ To grasp the form of a thing is to grasp that upon which the thing depends for its being (*esse*). Thus, an incipient understanding of cause and effect is on the scene from the start of human intellection, and it is metaphysics that reflects upon, highlights, and perfects this incipient understanding.

In everyday interactions with entities and other human persons, human beings manifest a natural desire to know, as Aristotle says. More specifically, upon seeing an entity or state of affairs—for example, a fire in the hills of Los Angeles—human persons quickly understand it as an effect, and they desire to know the cause of that effect. After seeing the hills ablaze, the natural question is: "Who or what caused such a fire?" Once the entity or situation is apprehended as an effect, that is, once it is understood to be in some way dependent upon something, there is enkindled in human beings a natural desire, or natural inclination, to know its cause. To the thoughtful observer, even the operations themselves of entities can be recognized as the "effects" of the agent performing them, and thus there is a natural desire to know just how the agent is a cause of its actions. It is important to add that once an observer discovers the ontological source (cause) of an entity, operation, or event, he has *an explanation* for the phenomenon he has encountered. Alasdair MacIntyre points out that modern thinking tends to separate too sharply causes and explanations, whereas in the Aristotelian-Thomistic view, causes and explanations, while not the same, are intertwined. He says, "*We* in the idioms of our contemporary speech distinguish sharply causes from explanations, but cause is always explanation-affording and *aitia qua* explanation is always cause-specifying."⁴⁴ To discover and articulate a cause is to have an explanation for its effect, and to explain something is to see it as dependent upon its proper cause. That is, an explanation is a cause as displayed, as articulated by a human agent. This desire to know and to search for the causes of things, and thus to have legitimate explanations for them, fuels the natural sciences and innovations in technology, and it is contemplated and refined in philosophical reflection. Indeed, philosophers can name and talk about the very desire to know as an "effect" of the human form, the intellectual soul. Ultimately, the metaphysician searches for the *causes of being*, and therefore he can

⁴³ Dewan, *Form and Being*, 69.

⁴⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *First Principles, Final Ends and Contemporary Philosophical Issues* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1990), 4.

highlight the role of form as that which gives being and the role of the end as the perfection of the form, the fullness of its being.

For our purposes, it is important to note that Aquinas enumerates three reasons why the human person naturally desires to know. He says (1) that knowledge is the ultimate perfection of the human person, (2) that understanding is the operation proper to man, as we have discussed, and (3) that each thing has a desire to be united to its source.⁴⁵ We can conclude that Aquinas presents the natural desire to know the causes of things, and ultimately to know the First Cause, as the fuel of metaphysics. For Thomas, metaphysical contemplation involves (1a) knowledge that perfects (2a) the operation most proper to man by putting him in touch, intellectually, with (3a) his source and end: God as the author of nature. Therefore, among human desires, Aquinas ranks the desire for truth, and specifically the truth about God, as the highest and the specifically human desire. He says:

No desire carries on to such sublime heights as the desire to understand the truth. Indeed, all our desires for pleasure, or other things of this sort that are craved by men, can be satisfied with other things, but the aforementioned desire does not rest until it reaches God, the highest point of reference for, and the maker of, things. This is why Wisdom appropriately states: "I dwelt in the highest places, and my throne is in a pillar of a cloud" (Sirach 24:7). And Proverbs (9:3) says that Wisdom "by her maids invites to the tower." Let those men be ashamed, then, who seek man's felicity in the most inferior things, when it is so highly situated.⁴⁶

Aquinas concludes that metaphysics or "first philosophy" is ultimately ordered to the knowledge of God. As Aquinas shows, the desire to know and to grasp causes, if highlighted and perfected in philosophical reflection, leads to the knowledge of God as the one from whom "forms flow forth into all creatures," that is, as the cause of creaturely forms and hence the cause of created being, who is himself form to the highest degree, form and being pure and simple.⁴⁷ Thus, metaphysics is a kind of training, disciplining, and perfecting of the human desire to know, a desire originally manifest in everyday human interactions and the various natural sciences.

⁴⁵ See *In I metaph.*, lec. 1, nos. 2–4.

⁴⁶ *Summa contra gentiles* (SCG) III, ch. 50.

⁴⁷ For Aquinas's description of God as the one from whom "forms flow forth into all creatures [ab eius intellectu effluunt formae in omnes creaturas]," see *De veritate*, q. 2, a. 1, ad 6.

Metaphysics, carried out from the philosophical perspective, forms this natural human desire, enabling it to reach its proper end, which is to enjoy the knowledge of God as First Cause; metaphysics is the natural completion and “interpreter” of the human desire for truth.

On Aristotle’s account, such theoretical activity is at the heart of human happiness because it is the activity that most fully perfects our human function. He says that happiness is activity in accord with “the supreme virtue, which will be the virtue of the best thing. The best is understanding, or whatever else seems to be the natural ruler and leader, and to understand what is fine and divine, by being itself either divine or the most divine element in us.”⁴⁸ Therefore, Aristotle argues: “We ought not to follow the makers of proverbs and ‘Think human, since you are human,’ or ‘Think mortal, since you are mortal.’ Rather, as far as we can, we ought to make ourselves immortal, and go to all lengths to live a life in accord with our supreme element.” Aristotle concludes that “for a human being the life in accord with understanding will be the supremely best and most pleasant. . . . This life, then, will also be happiest.”⁴⁹ For Aristotle, moral and political excellences are not the highest expressions of human nature, although they are necessary and noble in themselves. The life of thinking is higher than the practical life, and thus there is something in human agency that transcends the practical necessities of politics. Aristotle suggests that, if human beings fail to acknowledge the superiority of the life of thinking, they will attempt to satiate their natural desire for the infinite by ruling over and dominating others. If they fail to see the excellence of the life of thinking, they will conclude that the practical life of ruling is best, and they will attempt to extend their domination over as many people as possible and as completely as possible. Aristotle says that one who makes this mistake will think that “supreme power is the best of all things, because the possessors of it are able to perform the greatest number of noble actions. If so, the man who is able to rule, instead of giving up anything to his neighbor, ought rather to take away his power; and the father should care nothing for his son, nor the son for his father, nor friend for friend.”⁵⁰ Commenting on this text, Sokolowski says: “The life of ruling is not the simply highest life; we have to take our bearings from something higher. This also means that there is something in us that transcends political life, and only when political life acknowledges such transcendence can it find its proper place

⁴⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean ethics* (NE) 10.7.1177a13–17.

⁴⁹ Aristotle, NE 10.7.1177b32–78a2.

⁵⁰ Aristotle, *Pol.* 8.3.1325a35–38.

in human affairs.”⁵¹ Truth—and the respect for human persons as those who can know and pursue truth—is the foundation for civic friendship. This life of thinking and pursuit of truth for its own sake is not limited to metaphysics; it includes arts, music, literature, and the nobler expressions of human culture. However, metaphysics disciplines this desire for the infinite and completes it through activities that perfect human agents and their companions. The contemplative life allows the thirst for the infinite to be properly channeled, and thus it enables the citizens and their polity to be active and at peace.

In sum, metaphysics can be called the “interpreter” of the natural desire to know and to be united to our source, the highest cause that we call God, because metaphysical inquiry is the intellectual funnel through which our natural desire passes when it is active in philosophical reflection. Metaphysics “interprets” our natural desire to know by displaying to us what is most knowable in itself and hence what is most lovable, what is most worthy of our rational desire.⁵²

Grace as a Form

As we move from the natural to the supernatural, the structure of form as giving being and inclination continues to play a crucial role in Aquinas’s treatment of grace. Aquinas distinguishes two ways in which “man is aided by God’s gratuitous will.”⁵³ First, Aquinas says that a human being is assisted insofar as his soul is moved by God “to know or will or do something, in this way the gratuitous effect in man is not a quality, but a movement of the soul; for ‘motion is the act of the mover in the moved.’”⁵⁴ Second, St. Thomas says that human agents are assisted by God when he infuses a habitual gift (*habituale donum*) of grace into the human soul. Aquinas describes this habitual gift of grace as a supernatural quality, or super-added form, which heals, perfects, and uplifts the person made *ad imaginem Dei*. Aquinas argues that just as God gives human beings substantial forms to function as the principles of natural inclinations to operations perfective of the human agent, so too does God “infuse into those whom He moves

⁵¹ Robert Sokolowski, “The Human Person and Political Life,” *The Thomist* 65 (2001): 505–27, at 518–19.

⁵² See Plato, *Symposium* 210a–212c.

⁵³ *ST* I-II, q. 110, a. 2, resp.

⁵⁴ *ST* I-II, q. 110, a. 2, resp. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange describes these two modes of God’s gratuitous will assisting human agents as, respectively, 1) actual grace and 2) habitual grace; see *Grace: Commentary on the Summa Theologica of St. Thomas, IaIIae, q. 109–114*, trans. The Dominican Nuns of Corpus Christi Monastery (London: B. Herder, 1952), 117–43.

towards the acquisition of supernatural good, certain forms or supernatural qualities, whereby they may be moved by him sweetly and promptly to acquire eternal good.”⁵⁵ In this way, grace works in the soul “not in the manner of an efficient cause, but in the manner of a formal cause.”⁵⁶ Aquinas understands this habitual gift of grace as an “accidental” form in the human soul, giving a new kind of being and thus a new kind of inclination to the Christian.⁵⁷

Concerning the habitual gift of grace, Aquinas argues that it has two effects: (1) it imparts a new mode of being to the soul, and (2) it flows forth into acts that perfect this new mode of being. He says,

There is a double effect of [habitual] grace, even as of every other form; the first of which is being [*esse*], and the second is operation [*operatio*], as the work of heat is to make something hot and an external act of heating. And thus habitual grace, insofar as it heals or justifies the soul, or makes it pleasing to God, is called operating grace, whereas insofar as it is the principle of meritorious works, which also spring from free-choice, it is called cooperating grace.⁵⁸

Just as a natural form “gives” being and operating to the composite that it activates, so too does the supernatural form of grace give a new mode of being and operations to the human soul. Grace, flowing from the action of Christ, the legislator of the New Law of Grace, reforms the image of God in man and gives him a new kind of being, a share in the divine life of the Trinity, thereby inclining the human person to acts of charity, Christian religion, and ultimately supernatural beatitude.⁵⁹ The gift of grace therefore

⁵⁵ *ST* I-II, q. 110, a. 2, resp.

⁵⁶ *ST* I-II, q. 110, a. 2, resp.

⁵⁷ For the description of grace as an “accidental form,” see *ST* I-II, q. 109, a. 1, and q. 110, a. 2, especially ad 1 and ad 2. The description of grace as an “accidental” form should not be understood to mean that grace is somehow unimportant or trivial. Accidental in this context only means that grace is not the essence of what it is to be human. Aquinas says, “Although grace is more efficacious than nature, yet nature is more essential to man, and therefore more enduring” (*ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 6, ad 2). We can still be human, logically and metaphysically speaking, even if we are not in a state of grace. It should also be noted that, according to Aquinas, accidents are central to the perfection of the human person; when they are “positive” accidents, they can be understood as “perfections” or “improvements.” Virtues are “accidents” that perfect the person.

⁵⁸ *ST* I-II, q. 111, a. 2, resp.

⁵⁹ For Aquinas’s description of Christ as the legislator of the New Law of grace, see *ST* I-II, q. 108, a. 1, resp. On the “threefold” image of God in man, see *ST* I, q. 93, a. 4.

generates a *supernatural inclination* to acts of communion and friendship with the triune God.

In his discussion of the theological virtues, Aquinas describes charity as the “friendship of man for God,” and he says that God moves all things to their proper ends by impressing upon them the form whereby they are inclined to the end ordained by God, a point we have seen in some detail. By moving things to their due ends through the activity of their forms, God is said to order all things “sweetly.” However, Aquinas adds that the act of charity surpasses the natural ability of the human will, and so he concludes:

Unless some form be superadded to the natural power, inclining it to the act of love, this same act would be less perfect than the natural acts and the acts of the other powers; nor would it be easy and pleasurable. And this is evidently false, since no virtue has such a strong inclination to its act as charity has, nor does any virtue perform its act with so great pleasure. Therefore it is most necessary that, for us to perform the act of charity, there should be in us some habitual form superadded to the natural power, inclining that power to the act of charity, and causing it to act promptly and with pleasure.⁶⁰

In our discussion of Aquinas’s metaphysics, we saw that St. Thomas identifies three crucial aspects of natural desire: (1) the form/nature of an entity and (2) the inclination flowing from that form “toward” (3) the operations that achieve the end perfective of that agent. As Aquinas’s texts on grace and charity show, he argues that an analogous structure obtains in the supernatural realm; in order for human persons to know and to achieve the supernatural end prepared for them, namely the vision of the essence of the triune God, a new proportionality must be given to all three of these aspects: form, inclination, and operations. Through grace, a new mode of being is imparted to the human soul, and human agents are given the light of faith whereby the truth of their supernatural end and the means to achieve it are revealed. Therefore, a new inclination to acts that can “achieve” this end is imparted.⁶¹

⁶⁰ ST II-II, q. 23, a. 2, resp.

⁶¹ Aquinas says: “In order for a human being to be ordered toward the good of eternal life, it is also necessary that a sort of inception of that good should come to exist in the one who is promised eternal life. But eternal life consists in the full cognition of God, as is evident from John 17:3: ‘This is eternal life, that they should know you, the only true God.’ Hence, it is necessary that some inception of this supernat-

Lawrence Feingold says that, according to Aquinas, in order for human persons to enjoy beatitude: "A new proportionality needs to be given to man's nature, by which he will be proportioned to the end of eternal life. From this new proportionality (participation in the divine nature, according to 2 Pt 1:4) there must flow a new inclination to the supernatural end. Finally, the acts by which that end is acquired must be proportioned to the elevation of that end."⁶² Feingold says that for St. Thomas, "Sanctifying grace perfects nature by giving the creature a new proportionality with his supernatural end, and charity perfects the natural inclination of the will by giving it a new orientation."⁶³ Through grace and the inclination resulting from charity, the human will is directed to God, not merely as the Author of nature, but as the Author of grace. Feingold also says that "the acquisition or meriting of the end is given by means of the [acts of] other infused virtues, which are directed by charity."⁶⁴ The structure of supernatural desire mirrors that of natural desire, and therefore we see an instance of Aquinas's principle that "grace and virtue imitate nature."⁶⁵

Christian prayer is situated within this new trajectory given to human beings by God's grace. According to St. Thomas, prayer is an act stemming from the form of grace and perfecting the supernatural inclination of charity. Aquinas describes Christian prayer as one of the principle acts of the virtue of religion; he says it is an "interior act" of the virtue of religion enlivened by charity.⁶⁶ Prayer is an act of the practical intellect, and St. Thomas says that "the cause of prayer is the desire of charity, from which prayer must arise."⁶⁷ Further, Aquinas describes prayer itself as the "interpreter of our desires."⁶⁸ Drawing upon our previous comments concerning the link between causes and explanations, we can say that the explanation for Christian prayer is God's love for human beings revealed in Christ.

ural cognition should come to exist in us. And this inception comes through faith, which on the basis of an infused light holds fast to things that by nature exceed our cognition" (*De veritate*, q. 14, a. 2, resp.; translation mine).

⁶² Lawrence Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God According to St. Thomas Aquinas and His Interpreters* (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2010), 88.

⁶³ Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God*, 88.

⁶⁴ Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God*, 88.

⁶⁵ *ST II-II*, q. 31, a. 3, resp.

⁶⁶ See *ST II-II*, q. 82, proem. Devotion is the other interior act of religion discussed by Thomas.

⁶⁷ *ST II-II*, q. 83, a. 14; see also *ST II-II*, q. 83, a. 1, ad 2, for the claim that charity is the cause of prayer.

⁶⁸ For Aquinas's claim that prayer is an act of the practical intellect, see *ST II-II*, q. 83, a. 1, resp. For his description of prayer as the "interpreter of our desires," see: *ST II-II*, q. 83, a. 1, ad 1; q. 83, a. 9, resp.; *Super II Tim* 2, lec. 1.

The explanation for prayer is the gift of charity, enabling its recipient to love God and neighbor, that is, to desire union with the triune God and the good of one's neighbor, and it is this desire that is both formed by and expressed within prayer.

Aquinas argues that "we ought to pray for what we ought to desire"⁶⁹ and that in the Lord's Prayer, God himself, through the human nature of Christ, teaches us what is to be desired, in what order, and from whom. Aquinas says:

For since prayer is in some way the interpreter of our desire before God, then alone is it right to ask for something in our prayers when it is right that we should desire it. Now in the Lord's Prayer not only do we ask for all that we may rightly desire, but also in the order wherein we ought to desire them, so that this prayer not only teaches us to ask, but also gives shape to our whole affective life. Thus it is evident that the first thing to be the object of our desire is the end, and afterwards whatever is directed to the end. Now our end is God towards whom our affections tend in two ways: first, by our willing the glory of God, secondly, by willing to enjoy his glory. The first belongs to the love whereby we love God in himself, while the second belongs to the love whereby we love ourselves in God.⁷⁰

Aquinas therefore presents Christian prayer, especially the Lord's Prayer, as our graced response to God's gratuitous revelation; prayer teaches us to ask God for the things we can rightly desire and shows us how our desires should be ordered and expressed. It is an act of the virtue of religion that perfects a supernatural inclination stemming from the gifts of faith, hope, and charity.⁷¹ The graced desire for the triune God and for what enables us to live a life in service to such a God, flowing from charity and the "form" of grace, is structured, given expression, and "interpreted" in prayer.⁷² In sum, Christian prayer is an act of the virtue of religion enlivened by the gift of charity that "interprets" our desires for and before God.

We have now shown the similarities between metaphysics and prayer,

⁶⁹ *ST* II-II, q. 83, a. 7. As should be clear, we are speaking about the infused virtue of religion in this essay, as distinct from the acquired virtue of religion. On the distinction between infused and acquired virtues, see *ST* I-II, q. 63, aa. 3–4.

⁷⁰ *ST* II-II, q. 83, a. 9, resp.

⁷¹ See *ST* II-II, q. 83, a. 1, ad 2;

⁷² For a treatment of the role of desire in prayer for St. Thomas, see Paul Murray, *Praying with Confidence: Aquinas on the Lord's Prayer* (New York: Continuum, 2010).

namely that they are both interpreters of desire for God, and in both cases the desire is elicited by a prior act of intellect. Further, the role of form as giving being and inclination is central to both activities. However, in the next subsection we will briefly point out some important differences between the types of desire these activities “interpret” and the way in which desire is included within the acts themselves.

Similarities and Differences

The first difference between the desire of metaphysics and that of prayer is the source and end of each respective desire. The desire operative in metaphysics is natural, while Christian prayer is the “interpreter” of a supernatural desire. Metaphysics does not immediately address God the First Cause, much less God the Father. Metaphysics first attends to being; its subject matter is not God, but *ens commune*, and only afterward does it arrive at knowledge of God as the First Cause of being.⁷³ Further, the knowledge of God gained in metaphysics pertains to God as known by natural reason, which means that God is only glimpsed as cause and end of these effects, and this flash of knowledge is available to the light of natural reason. By contrast, Christian prayer, especially its paradigmatic instance in the Lord’s Prayer, begins by directly addressing God the Father as he is made known by the incarnate Word. We address God in the relationship of friendship through filial adoption, such that we direct our prayer in a very personal manner to the triune God who is made known “not by flesh and blood,” but by the gift of grace.

The second difference concerns the distinction between practical and speculative thinking. Aquinas presents prayer as an act of the practical intellect, while metaphysics is an act of the speculative intellect. It is important to note that Aquinas does not posit two intellects in the human mind; there is not one speculative intellect and one practical intellect. Rather, man has one intellect, or one power of understanding, that can be directed to the speculative work of simply contemplating truth or to the practical work of directing action in light of what it apprehends.⁷⁴ As a

⁷³ On the point that God is not the subject of or even included in the subject of metaphysics, see John Wippel, *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas II* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 31–64, esp. 38: “But not only is God not the subject of metaphysics. According to Thomas, God does not fall under the notion of being in general or being as being that is its subject. Hence God enters into the metaphysician’s consideration only indirectly, as the principle or cause of that which the metaphysician considers directly—being as being.”

⁷⁴ See *ST I*, q. 79, a. 11. Concerning the intellective power as a whole, Aquinas claims

result, desire is operative in the speculative activities of metaphysics and in the practical activities of prayer, but in different ways. Aquinas identifies three factors that determine whether *knowledge* is speculative, practical, or partly practical and partly speculative: (1) the object known, (2) the mode of knowing the object, and (3) the end to which the knowledge is directed.⁷⁵ The first source of the difference between practical and speculative knowledge is the object to which the desire tends. In the case of acts of speculative intellect in metaphysical contemplation, the person is engaged in understanding “speculables,” or objects that exist and operate independently of our actions. That is, we do not cause or “work on” God while contemplating the First Cause; metaphysics is the contemplation of objects that are not, strictly speaking, subject to our activities. Further, the contemplation itself of “inoperable objects” is the ultimate end of activities of speculative thinking. While desire is operative as a motivating force in the metaphysician, the desire is not “expressed” in the activity as personally or intimately as it is in acts of the practical intellect. Rather, the desire “hides” behind the speculative acts of the metaphysician, while the acts themselves are concerned to find and to behold the being of the objects in themselves and for the sake of contemplating their truth.

On the other hand, prayer is an act of the practical intellect, since to pray is to act as a cause of the things prayed for.⁷⁶ Prayer is a cause by requesting, but in the case of Christian prayer the request does not dispose *the one to whom the request is made to grant it, but rather the one asking*. By praying, we do not inform God of our desires, change his mind, or convince him to grant our requests; rather, the act of prayer *disposes the person praying to receive* the gifts that God wants to grant us by means of our prayers.⁷⁷

here that it is accidental whether its object is directed toward the contemplation of truth or toward operation: “To a thing apprehended by the intellect, it is accidental whether it be ordered to operation or not, and according to this the speculative and practical intellects differ. For it is the speculative intellect which orders what it apprehends, not to operation, but to the consideration of truth; while the practical intellect is that which orders what it apprehends to operation.”

⁷⁵ See *ST* I, q. 14, a. 16.

⁷⁶ See *ST* II-II, q. 83, a. 1.

⁷⁷ Aquinas says, “We need to pray to God, not in order to make known to him our needs or desires but that we ourselves may be reminded of the necessity of having recourse to God’s help in these matters” (*ST* II-II, q. 83, a. 2, ad 1). It is illuminating to compare this aspect of Aquinas’s treatment of Christian prayer (namely, that prayer disposes the one praying to receive God’s gifts but does not “dispose” or “influence” God himself) with his statements at *In I peri herm.*, lec. 7, no. 5, where he says that a subordinate has no power to “move” his superior except by the expression of his desire to the superior. This text shows both the similarities and

Thus, the object of prayer, the object of the request, is an “operable” object in a qualified sense. The Christian asking for his daily bread is asking for an object (and here object does not apply only to material things, but certainly includes them) that he “works on” or brings about by his activity as a concurrent secondary cause, and in this case the activity of prayer itself is a gift of God’s grace. Therefore, prayer is an expression of a supernatural desire, which flows from the form of grace and the inclination of charity, that functions by presenting the object prayed for as desirable from God the Father, and this presentation and expression of desire is part and parcel of obtaining the object from God known in faith as our Father. This biblical sense of God as Father, as one to whom we should and must pray, comes from hearing what God tells us about himself and the world, not from natural experience and thinking.

We should not fail to mention the Augustinian insight that citizens of the heavenly kingdom must use the things of this world so as to draw closer to God and never use God to enjoy the things of this world. However, even our use of earthly realities is something that we must ask God for, since he ordains that he gives things “through” our acts of asking for them. Therefore, in metaphysical contemplation desire fuels the activity of the theoretical life in a less personal and less urgent manner, but in Christian prayer desire is more urgent and takes center stage. This fact makes Christian prayer more intensely personal than metaphysical speculation, since in prayer our desires are being expressed in a practical mode of thinking as dependent children of a loving Father, while in metaphysics the objects of thinking are discussed from a philosophical and thus contemplative perspective. In metaphysics, beings are marveled at for the sake of truth itself. Thus, the difference between prayer and metaphysics is not just that metaphysics flows from a natural desire while prayer stems from a supernatural desire, but also that desire enters into prayer in a way different from that in which it enters into metaphysics precisely because prayer is a causal act of the practical intellect.

Thomism and the Theology of Disclosure

Our reflections in the previous section of this essay were an exercise in Thomistic metaphysics and speculative theology, and they can be complemented by developing points from phenomenology and the theology of disclosure. In this section, we will discuss the ways in which the differences and similarities between metaphysics and prayer manifest themselves to us, and so we will be engaged in what Sokolowski calls the “theology of disclo-

differences between natural speech and the graced speech of prayer.

sure." Sokolowski says that the "Christian things" contemplated and studied in theology are those realities "that have been presented to us in biblical and Christian revelation," such as God known as triune, the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, the sacraments, the Church, and Christian prayer. The theology of disclosure has the task of describing "how the Christian things taught by the Church . . . come to light. It is to examine how they appear."⁷⁸

Sokolowski situates the theology of disclosure between two other forms of theological reflection: (1) "speculative theology," or theology of being, exemplified by Aquinas and other scholastics (the kind on display in the first section of this essay), and (2) positive theology, which focuses primarily on biblical studies and the historical context within which revelation took place and "attempts to show how the articles of faith are found in scripture and tradition."⁷⁹ Sokolowski proposes that the theology of disclosure complements both speculative and positive theology by highlighting aspects of Christian experience and belief that are discussed but not made thematic in the other two forms of theology. He says: "The theology of disclosure differs from speculative theology because it examines the manifestation of Christian things and not, primarily, their nature, definition, and causes; and it differs from positive theology because it is concerned with essential structures of disclosure, which would hold in all times and places, not with matters of historical fact."⁸⁰ The theology of disclosure attempts to manifest, in theological reflection, the manifestation itself of "Christian things"; it attempts to describe the essential structures of appearance involved in how Christian things come to light for the believer. Although this theological thinking differs from both speculative and positive theology, Sokolowski says, "it is obviously related to them and does not contradict anything they establish as true."⁸¹ While speculative theology often makes use of Thomistic metaphysics and positive theology utilizes historical, cultural, textual, and linguistic studies, the theology of disclosure uses insights from Husserlian phenomenology to shed light on how the truths of Christian faith present themselves to the believer.

In our phenomenological reflection, we will highlight the fact that human reason is not solely the ability to abstract the forms of things,

⁷⁸ Robert Sokolowski, *Eucharistic Presence: A Study in the Theology of Disclosure* [hereafter, *Theology of Disclosure*] (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 7.

⁷⁹ See Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 93–95.

⁸⁰ Sokolowski, *Theology of Disclosure*, 8.

⁸¹ Sokolowski, *Theology of Disclosure*, 8.

make judgments, and reason from premises to conclusions, although such activities of thinking are important. Most fundamentally, reason is “the capacity to let things come to light, to let the intelligibility of things show up for ourselves and others.”⁸² To show how human reason sheds light on being, we will discuss two themes in phenomenology: (1) the importance of making distinctions and (2) the way in which things themselves are presented to us as identities within manifolds of appearance. We will then incorporate these two points into a theological reflection by (1a) discussing what Sokolowski calls the “Christian distinction” between God and the world and (2a) showing that the activity of Christian prayer presupposes that the one praying sees the world in a new light. Healed, elevated, and perfected by grace, human reason is able to allow the deepest intelligibility of things to come to light, to see the same realities contemplated in philosophy but set within a new trajectory set by God’s redemptive actions, and thus to see them as occasions for prayer and gratitude to the God who creates them. With the aid of phenomenology, we can describe the way things manifest themselves to the metaphysician qua philosopher as distinct from the way things present themselves to the Christian qua adopted child of God.

Distinctions and Identities within Manifolds of Appearance

Sokolowski says that the activity of making strategic distinctions is at the core of philosophy.⁸³ By showing that *this* is not *that*, by drawing our atten-

⁸² Robert Sokolowski, *Christian Faith and Human Understanding: Studies on the Eucharist, Trinity, and the Human Person* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 1. Aquinas himself says that the truth achieved by our minds can be compared to things as that which manifests to that which is manifested; see *ST*, I, q. 16, a. 3, ad 1. Concerning the relationship between Thomistic metaphysics and phenomenology, Sokolowski says that phenomenology “would provide an expanded analysis of what the person does in order to achieve knowledge, and it would also discuss the identity of the human ‘agent of truth.’ It would examine how things present themselves to the dative of manifestation, and how entities are identifiable between the two states of being simply and being known.” Sokolowski, “The Relation of Phenomenology and Thomistic Metaphysics to Religion: A Study of Patrick Masterson’s *Approaching God: Between Phenomenology and Theology*,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 68 [2014]: 603–26, at 617. For an excellent example of the fruitful integration of Thomism and phenomenology, see Kevin White, “Friendship Ground Zero: Aquinas on Good Will,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 9 (2011): 539–78.

⁸³ The following paragraphs on the nature and importance of distinctions are based on Sokolowski’s discussion of distinctions in the following works: “Making Distinctions,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 32 (1979): 639–76, reprinted in Robert

tion to the essential differences between things, and hence to their substantial sameness “with” themselves, distinctions are a fundamental way in which human reason is active in manifesting the being of things. It is true that we must have some familiarity with entities before we can distinguish them accurately, but a distinction is originally registered when realities or situations present themselves as a bundle, as entangled with each other. Distinctions are activities of reason that enable us to shed light on things or situations that present themselves as vague, confusing, or distressing.⁸⁴ We may distinguish discipline from spite or the performance of a play from the play itself, or we may distinguish justice from fairness, or revenge from both justice and fairness. If we are making legitimate distinctions, we are shedding light on the being of things so that they are more vividly present, intellectually, to us and to our interlocutors.

Although distinctions are made in a concrete setting, often in the face of a situation calling for a response or one shrouded in obscurity, they reach fundamental and necessary truths; distinctions are rooted in the particular experience of a concrete situation but transcend it. If we have hit upon a valid distinction, we are reaching the being of things and thus displaying a truth that holds “for all time.” To use Sokolowski’s example, if someone, in the heat of an argument, says, “I’m angry with you, but I don’t hate you,” he has manifested a distinction that holds for all arguers across the ages. Anger simply is not hatred, and distinguishing anger from hatred enables human persons to understand each reality, both anger and hatred, more adequately. We gain this clarity of understanding by showing that one item being distinguished necessarily is not and cannot be the other, and thus that each item has its own nature, its unique mode of being and manifestation.

Distinctions are therefore immersed in both language and being; they are not merely linguistic somersaults or maneuvers in word games, nor are they entities locked within the mind of the one making the distinction. Such (mis)understandings of distinctions betray an insufficient philosophical grasp of the relation between words and the being of things. On

Sokolowski, *Pictures, Quotations, and Distinctions: Fourteen Essays in Phenomenology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 55–92; “The Method of Philosophy: Making Distinctions,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 51 (1998): 515–32. While all philosophy, and indeed all clear thinking, includes the making of strategic distinctions, it is one of Sokolowski’s distinctive contributions to discuss distinctions as such.

⁸⁴ Aquinas also speaks about human reason as a light; he says we can speak of human reason as a “light” precisely insofar as reason manifests being in and through its acts of cognition; see *ST* I, q. 67, a. 1.

this point, Sokolowski says: "There is an ontological force to distinctions as such. When we make distinctions we are not just determining language in isolation from being. In determining language we are also articulating being, not as two activities that only happen to be conjoined, but as a single activity that has two aspects."⁸⁵ Clearly, there are occasions, such as mistaken speech, outright lying, or "distinctions without a difference," in which language and being may be separated. However, they could only be separated if they are ontologically correlated with each other in the first place. A lie or a "distinction without a difference" is only possible because speech has the natural function of manifesting being to another speaker. As Sokolowski says, "determining language and articulating being is a hendiadys."⁸⁶

The phrase "distinction without a difference" can assist us further in clarifying the relationship between being and language at work in the activity of making distinctions. One might be tempted to think of the "difference" as ontological, as out in the objective world, and the "distinction" as psychological or "in" the soul, and therefore when one makes a "distinction without a difference" there is nothing ontological (difference) corresponding to the psychological entity (distinction). However, such an understanding would miss the ontological force of distinctions as such. A distinction is as objective as the difference it illuminates; in fact, we should see that "*a distinction is a difference that is explicitly displayed.*"⁸⁷ When someone makes a valid distinction, the distinction is the difference insofar as it, the difference, is displayed to the person(s) involved in coming to understand the two realities being distinguished through the use of language.

Human agents can fail in at least two ways in making distinctions. First, a person can fail to distinguish a two, and thus incorrectly remain with the two as if they were a one. In this case, a genus is often identified with one of its species. The species is absorbed back into the genus, resulting in a failure to see that the genus can be itself in various ways. Second, a person can overdistinguish, and thus attempt to illegitimately break a one into a two. These are failures to display things as they are, not unbridgeable gaps between psychological and objective entities.

Precisely because distinctions are differences as displayed, valid distinctions enable the human agents who make them to see entities at work being the kinds of things they are. That is, *distinctions are related to our intel-*

⁸⁵ Sokolowski, "Making Distinctions," in *Pictures, Quotations, and Distinctions*, 74.

⁸⁶ Sokolowski, "Making Distinctions," in *Pictures, Quotations, and Distinctions*, 74.

⁸⁷ Sokolowski, "The Method of Philosophy," 521.

lectual grasp of the forms of things and hence to formal causality. When we distinguish between anger and hatred, or between a rat and a mouse, then each item “stands forth in a kind of vivid necessity, each could not be the other, and hence each necessarily is what it is.”⁸⁸ Distinctions help to manifest the formal causes of the items distinguished and therefore sharpen our understanding of the forms of things. As we saw in the first section of this essay, both Aristotle and Aquinas argue that the form of an entity is the source of the difference of that entity, and the activity of distinguishing two items displays this difference, and thus manifests the shape of each item in the distinction precisely by showing that it cannot be the item from which it is now distinguished. Distinctions bring the formal causes of things more vividly to light. This point enables us to see how phenomenology complements Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics; it shows in rich detail the activities of the human subject in manifesting objective reality, and conversely how reality manifests itself to us. Thus, phenomenology helps us see how cognition is a “joint activity of subject and object.”

Because distinctions assist human agents in recognizing the forms of entities, they are also at the basis of judgments, definitions, and the search for causes so important for metaphysics. We can only make judgments if we register, at least implicitly, that a feature (such as brown) is not the subject of which it is a feature (hair); we can only define an object if we register its genus and its specific difference from other kinds within that genus. For example, Aristotle defines a virtue of character as a “state [*hexis*] concerned with choice, lying in a mean relative to us, this being determined by reason and the way in which the man of practical wisdom would determine it. Now it is a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect.”⁸⁹ In order to formulate this definition, Aristotle must first distinguish states from feelings and capacities, a mean from extremes, a mathematical mean from a “mean relative to us,” and an extreme of excess from one of deficiency. Distinctions provide the raw material for judgments and definitions. Further, we can only search for the causes of things if we first register the distinction between a cause and its effect. Perhaps more fundamentally, we must also register the distinction between an entity in itself and an entity precisely as an effect, as pointing toward a source of its being. These distinctions enable us to investigate the causes of things, that is, to engage in the kind of thinking proper to metaphysics.

Since distinctions bring things from obscurity to light, they enable human agents to recognize more clearly the identity of things and are

⁸⁸ Sokolowski, “The Method of Philosophy,” 528.

⁸⁹ NE 2.6.1106b35–07a4.

therefore crucial for moral deliberation. The registration of a distinction and the increased clarity it brings to the items distinguished enables human agents to respond to those entities in more appropriate ways. Distinctions allow us to see things as they are, and conversely they allow things to be themselves for us, and this clarity of vision makes it possible for us to enhance our moral interactions with entities and other people. For example, when a child is able to distinguish discipline from spite, or when a man distinguishes justice from revenge or anger from hatred, a new avenue of possible behavior opens up before him. He is no longer locked into a certain way of responding, and thus the distinction liberates him to see possibilities of action that would otherwise remain closed. A child can more adequately respond to discipline when he can distinguish it from spite, and a man can better undertake just actions when he can distinguish justice from revenge. More fundamentally, one can draw a crucial distinction between the end of an activity or entity (its *telos*, completion, or perfection) and the purposes (intentions or motivations) of human agents in acting.⁹⁰ When this distinction dawns upon a human agent, then she can see that her purposes are not the sole, or even the primary, arbiter in moral matters, and she is therefore freed to be more creative and virtuous in her activities. Her actualization of this potential, which has opened for her due to the dawning of the distinction, will depend upon her character, itself a deposit of her prior actions and (in part) a legacy of her upbringing, but the distinction provides her with the *dunamis* to reform or solidify her character. Distinctions enable human agents to see things under a new slant, and therefore they open possibilities of moral action in accord with the natures of things, including human nature.

We now turn to the second theme from phenomenology, a theme which has two aspects. An important, bipartite claim in phenomenology is (a) that human agents, in perception and thinking, are in touch with *the things themselves*, and (b) that the entities known manifest themselves in and through a manifold of appearances. Sokolowski says: "The core doctrine in phenomenology is the teaching that every act of consciousness that we perform, every experience that we have, is intentional; it is essentially 'consciousness of' or an 'experience of' something or other. All our

⁹⁰ See Francis Slade, "Ends and Purposes," in *Final Causality in Nature and Human Affairs*, ed. Richard Hassing (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 83-85. See also Slade, "On the Ontological Priority of Ends and Its Relevance to the Narrative Arts," in *Beauty, Art, and the Polis*, ed. Alice Ramos (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 58-69.

awareness is directed toward objects.”⁹¹ By concentrating on this sense of intentionality, phenomenology is able to show that: “The mind and the world are correlated with one another. Things do appear to us, things truly are disclosed, and we, on our part, do display, both to ourselves and to others, the way things are.”⁹² Phenomenology gives an account of the various ways in which things appear to human agents, thereby shedding light on the nature of human intelligence by focusing on the intentional nature of consciousness. Phenomenology also enables us to focus on the *identity* of a given entity as it manifests itself to us in a manifold of appearances.

When we encounter an object in perception, we grasp the thing itself in a continuous flow of sides, aspects, and profiles. We do encounter the thing itself in our experience, but we always encounter it from a certain angle. I may see the front of the building but not the back, and thus the building itself is given to me in a blend of presences and absences. Looking at the front of the building from a given angle, the front (side) is present to me as I look at it “from here” (aspect) within a unique temporal flow (profile), while the back of the building is absent to me. Although the back of the building may be absent from me, I am aware, based upon my perception of the front, of the back of the building as absent and of my ability to walk around and make it present. Such awareness is not inference, but a more immediate sense of the absence of a side of a given object that we encounter in experience. In Husserl’s terminology, the front of the building would be given in a fulfilled intention because we are in the direct presence of this side, but the back of the building would be given in an empty intention, since we are aware that the back is absent to us but could become present. Perception is therefore a blend of presence and absence in which the thing itself is given to us in a manifold of appearances. For its part, the object is the identity “in” and “behind” these presences and absences. The object is the identity within the manifold of its appearances, so by attending to the appearances of an entity we are attending to the way a given entity shows itself. We recognize the identity of the thing in its modes of appearance.

The things we encounter in perception can also be remembered, imagined, named, discussed, and anticipated. In all these modes of human involvement, the thing itself is encountered and known, and in each act of perception, speech, or memory the thing itself is the identity within the manifold of its appearances and is recognized as such. The appearances of the thing are distinguished from the thing, but the thing itself is the

⁹¹ Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 8.

⁹² Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 12.

identity presented in and behind its characteristic appearances. Further, the being of the thing, we could say its form and characteristic operations, determines its mode of appearing. Sokolowski says: "Each kind of thing prescribes its own particular series of appearances within which it can be identified as itself; Husserl says that each kind of thing is a rule for a certain sequence of ordered appearances. The thing itself governs its own appearances, within which it is recognizable for what it itself is."⁹³ Things—knives, trees, dogs, men, words, games—have a characteristic mode of appearing, and an essential aspect of human reason is the ability to recognize and to respond to things as they are perceived, understood, spoken about, and remembered.

Appearances, therefore, are not merely psychological events, but the unfolding of a thing's nature, and we, as rational agents, are able to see things as the identity within their manifold of appearances. Aquinas argues in a similar way. He claims: "Our intellect, which takes cognizance of the essence of a thing as its proper object, gains knowledge from sense, of which the proper objects are external accidents. Hence from *external appearances we come to the knowledge of the essence of things*."⁹⁴ Further, the identity of a thing, its nature, is seen more clearly by human agents as they perceive it, speak about it, remember it, and distinguish it from other entities. Phenomenology restores appearances to their proper ontological place by showing how being displays itself to us, and therefore it allows us to identify a given reality as the identity "within" and "behind" its characteristic manifestations. Sokolowski says: "The point of phenomenological description is to show what kind of manifold is involved in bringing about the concrete and intuitive presence of the object we are concerned with, which is the identity within this manifold [of appearances]."⁹⁵ Phenomenology helps us to begin with what is "first for us" by showing that appearances are a part of what is real. Appearances are a part of being; appearances are, and they should not be contrasted with being or put over against it. Rather, appearances must be described so as to see how they manifest the being and identity of things.

*Theology of Disclosure: The Christian Distinction as the
Framework for Prayer*

I wish to claim that the two phenomenological themes we have discussed

⁹³ Sokolowski, *Theology of Disclosure*, 24.

⁹⁴ *ST I*, q. 18, a. 2, resp.

⁹⁵ Robert Sokolowski, *Husserlian Meditations: How Words Present Things* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 103.

can be developed in the theology of disclosure in order to clarify the relationship between metaphysics and prayer. First, we will extend the philosophy of distinctions by appealing to what Sokolowski calls the "Christian Distinction." Second, we will show that faith gives a new profile on both entities in the world and our own desires, a new profile that leads us to prayer.

Sokolowski points out that, in the realm of Christian faith as a response to God's revelation, the world is seen as radically distinct from God. God is not the best thing in the world, as he may have been conceived by Aristotle and other pagan philosophers, nor is the world co-eternal with God, as it certainly was conceived by Aristotle. Rather, Christian life and teaching introduce a purified notion of God, such that God freely chooses to create the world *ex nihilo at the beginning of time*.⁹⁶ Sokolowski says: "In Christian faith God is understood not only to have created the world, but to have permitted the distinction between himself and the world to occur. He is not established as God by the distinction."⁹⁷ However, by creating the world, God's being, goodness, and greatness are not thereby increased. God would be, and indeed "was," all that there is without diminishing his goodness or perfection. Even without creating the world he is the utter perfection of being and goodness. After creation, there are more beings and more good things, but God's eternal perfection and simplicity are not thereby altered in any way.⁹⁸ God's being, goodness, simplicity, and perfec-

⁹⁶ Sokolowski's notion of the Christian distinction aligns nicely with and extends Aquinas's distinction between the philosophical and theological understandings of creation. Philosophically we can know that all things are ontologically dependent upon the First Cause, but we cannot decide if the world is eternal or not. The revelation of Sacred Scripture and the gift of grace enable us to know through faith that the world also had a "temporal" beginning. Sokolowski's Christian distinction highlights the differences that come into play once God is revealed as the Creator of the cosmos *ex nihilo* and in time. For Aquinas's position on creation, see: Mark Johnson, "Did St. Thomas Attribute a Doctrine of Creation to Aristotle?" *The New Scholasticism* 63 (1989): 129–55; Johnson, "Aquinas' Changing Evaluation of Plato on Creation," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 66 (1992): 81–88; Timothy B. Noone, "The Originality of St. Thomas's Position on the Philosophers and Creation," *The Thomist* 60 (1996): 275–300; Lawrence Dewan, "Thomas Aquinas, Creation, and Two Historians," *Laval théologique et philosophique* 50 (1994): 363–87; Dewan, "St. Thomas and Creation: Does God Create 'Reality'?" *Science et esprit* 51 (1999): 5–25; John Wippel, "Aquinas on Creation and Preambles of Faith," *The Thomist* 78 (2014): 1–36.

⁹⁷ Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason*, 33.

⁹⁸ See Aquinas, *De malo*, q. 5, a. 1, ad 4: "Bonum creatum additum bono increato non facit maius bonum, nec magis beatum."

tion are so complete and intense that the act of creation in no way improves him, nor is creation necessitated as in an emanationist philosophy.

Just as natural distinctions enable us to understand better the items distinguished and thus enhance our capacity to respond to those things virtuously, so too the Christian distinction gives us a fuller understanding of both God and the world and enables us to respond to God through the virtue of religion, with its acts of prayer and devotion.⁹⁹ An important difference, however, between natural distinctions and the Christian distinction is that we make natural distinctions through the exercise of our own rationality, whereas the Christian distinction comes to us through God's gratuitous revelation of it. The Christian distinction is the difference between God and the world as displayed, that is, as revealed by God. Thomas Prufer says: "Publicity, choosing to manifest to others and manifesting choices determining others, becomes in the extreme both the gratuitous establishment of the plurality of being (the choice that-others-be) and the gratuitous revelation of the gratuitousness of this establishment."¹⁰⁰ Human language is now used to express divinely revealed truth, and thus the Christian distinction, or the distinctive understanding of the difference between God and the world made available to us in God's gratuitous revelation of this difference, sheds light not only on the divine being but also on the being of the world. That is, because the Christian distinction reveals a fuller understanding of God, it *thereby* manifests a more profound understanding of the world.

As a result of the Christian distinction, the world and ourselves—the most favored parts of the world, the ones created to the image and likeness of the creator—are seen in a new light. Sokolowski says:

This shift in thinking does not just introduce a new sense of the divine. It also introduces a new sense of the world, which is now seen as capable of not being, and a new sense of ourselves, who are seen to have been created through the personal knowledge and choice of God. . . . *Everything looks different*. Salvation is now understood as being achieved by a divine action that has no parallel in the

⁹⁹ I do not wish to suggest that there are no echoes of the Christian distinction within the natural order. In fact, Aquinas holds that it belongs to the natural law to ask God for assistance and to offer sacrifice to God (see *ST* I-II, q. 85). Rather, our point is simply that the understanding of what God is, of what the world is, and of the relation between God and the world becomes thematized and purified in an unexpected (indeed, unexpectedable) way in Christianity.

¹⁰⁰ Thomas Prufer, *Recapitulations: Essays in Philosophy* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 33.

interventions of the gods described in polytheistic religions. We are saved by the redemptive action of God in Christ, as action that was anticipated by the providential and saving acts of the Old Covenant, an action that sheds light even on the act of Creation, which is now seen as the first of the saving acts of God.¹⁰¹

Since God is revealed to be who he is, to be He Who Is, the world is now understood to be the result of sheer generosity, wisdom, and love. The metaphysical and the personal are integrated in an extraordinary way in this understanding of God, who as Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, chooses that others be and chooses to reveal his choice that others be. Therefore, we can come to know that we exist as the result of something like a personal transaction, and since the world and ourselves come to be through the personal, free, and unnecessitated loving choice of God, gratitude and prayer are now displayed as the appropriate responses to such a God.

This unique distinction between God and the world, a central tenet of Christian belief, opens up the logical and theological space for understanding the other mysteries revealed by God in Christ, and therefore it has an especially important role in Catholic theology. Guy Mansini says that part of the “theological importance of the Christian distinction is that it provides the framework within which the Christian mysteries can be asserted without incoherence.”¹⁰² Within the framework of the Christian distinction, we can “assert without incoherence” the intimate connections between the doctrines of creation and divine governance, on the one hand, and religion and prayer, on the other hand. According to Aquinas, because God is so intensely perfect and transcendent, he is active in the world he creates without destroying or interfering with the natures of his creatures. His being and goodness are such that he can govern things most immanently without competing with them or impinging on their proper autonomy.¹⁰³ As Dewan says, God’s “immanence flows from his transcendence,” and thus God, understood in Christianity, governs creatures sweetly, that is, in accordance with the natures that he has created.¹⁰⁴ He is the cause of

¹⁰¹ Sokolowski, *Theology of Disclosure*, 228–29.

¹⁰² Guy Mansini, “Christology of Disclosure in Robert Sokolowski,” in *Theology Needs Philosophy: Acting against Reason Is Contrary to the Nature of God*, ed. Matthew L. Lamb (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2016), 216.

¹⁰³ See *ST I*, qq. 103–5.

¹⁰⁴ See Lawrence Dewan, “St. Thomas and the Divine Origin of Law: Some Notes,” *Civilizar Ciencias Sociales y Humanas* 15 (2008): 123–34, at 129.

the secondary causality of his creatures, both making them to be at work being themselves and directing them through his law and grace. God is such that his governing direction of creatures includes their ability to be real causes, to participate in the dignity of being a source of order in the world.

In the light of the Christian distinction, we more readily see God as both the transcendent creator and the intimate governor of reality, which is the “profile” of God we need in order to exercise the Christian virtue of religion and its various acts, such as prayer. According to Aquinas, to be “religious” means to know God precisely as creator and governor and ourselves as owing service to him, not for his benefit but for our own. Aquinas argues that we must understand a servant in relation to his proper lord, and thus where there is a unique kind of lordship there must be a unique mode of service corresponding to it. He says: “Now it is evident that lordship belongs to God in a proper and singular way, because he made all things, and because he has supreme primacy over all. Therefore a special type of service is due to him. And this service is designated by the name ‘*latria*’ among the Greeks. And therefore it pertains properly to religion.”¹⁰⁵ He says that it pertains to the virtue of religion to reverence God precisely insofar as he is “the first principle as to the creation and governing of things.”¹⁰⁶ Enjoying the virtue of religion and exercising it in the acts of prayer presuppose that we see the world and God in a particular light. We must see the world as wanted and chosen by a God who, to be perfectly blessed, needs neither the world nor the service of its highest creatures, and who creates and governs all things without corrupting their natures or lessening their autonomy. It is fitting to pray to such a God and to render him the service of religion. Aristotle’s understanding of God is an anticipation of this elevated knowledge of the divine, but to know God only as Aristotle knew him does not provide a sufficient framework for the acts of prayer as they are understood in Christian faith. To extend an Aristotelian analogy, one would not ask the general of the army for help tying one’s shoes, unless one knew more about the general than merely that he was a general.¹⁰⁷

The revealed doctrine of creation and the Christian distinction are therefore crucial for the proper understanding of religion and prayer: prayer flows from religion, which appropriately regards God as the creator and governor of the world. The distinction between God and the world as

¹⁰⁵ *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 1, ad 3.

¹⁰⁶ *ST* II-II, q. 81, a. 3, resp.

¹⁰⁷ See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 12.10.

we have described it opens up the logical and theological space for us to exercise religion and prayer appropriately. We can therefore see another aspect of the relationship between metaphysics and Christian prayer. Prayer, in the Christian understanding, rests on the metaphysical doctrine of the God who is *ipsum esse per se subsistens*, who creates the world out of sheer generosity, governs it *suaviter*, and redeems it in the Incarnation. Unless prayer is appreciated along the lines of this understanding of creation and divine governance given in Christian faith, that is, unless it is seen in the light of the Christian distinction, it will be truncated or deformed.

Aquinas also discusses the ways in which faith and the understanding of God that it opens to human agents are necessary for prayer. He says: "Faith is necessary in reference to God to whom we pray; that is, we need to believe that we can obtain from him what we seek."¹⁰⁸ Aquinas adds that it is "through faith that man comes to know of God's omnipotence and mercy, which are the source whence prayer impetrates what it asks for."¹⁰⁹ Faith not only enables us to believe that we can obtain from God what we pray for, in a qualified sense of obtaining, but it also shows us that the God to whom we are praying is such that he can enable our prayers to be efficacious without undergoing change on his part. Faith is necessary for prayer because it enables the believer to know the depth of God's omnipotence and his mercy, or better, to know that God is merciful because he is omnipotent. Without the understanding of who God is, imparted by faith, we would be unable to say, as we do now, both (1) that prayer is efficacious in its own mysterious way and (2) that prayer does not change or "influence" God. We could not say that God, from all eternity and without undergoing any change, ordains that some things be given to us through our own acts of prayer, which are themselves gifts of grace. The metaphysics of creation expressed in the Christian distinction enables us to avoid the extremes (a) of a God who is altered and influenced by our religious actions, a God who needs our praise and is angry without it, and (b) of a God who is remote, distant, cold, and unconcerned with the actions of mortals. Without the Christian distinction, our understanding of prayer would inevitably slip back into a quasi-pagan view, in which the divine being(s) can be persuaded or appeased by the prayers of mortals or in which a perfect being would be unaware of and unconcerned with our prayers.

I wish now to develop our reflection on the Christian distinction by appealing to the second phenomenological theme we discussed above.

¹⁰⁸ ST II-II, q. 83, a. 15, resp.

¹⁰⁹ ST II-II, q. 83, a. 15, ad 3.

We showed how an entity presents itself as the identity within a manifold of appearances, and therefore we encounter entities in a blend of sides, aspects, and profiles. I wish to claim that the gift of grace and the Christian doctrines of creation and redemption enable us to take up a new profile on things, but a profile different from the natural profiles we have of things. This new profile of things is only analogous to its natural ones. Through God's revelation and gift of grace, the Christian is enabled to recognize another dimension of the things he encounters, its "deepest" dimension where it is being held in existence by a God who created the world and time itself out of love, became incarnate, died, and rose from the dead. As Sokolowski says, the Christian distinction introduces a "dimensional difference, a new way of taking things. It introduces a new way in which the world as a whole, and everything in the world, can be interpreted."¹¹⁰ The dimensional difference introduced by Christianity enables us to recognize this new aspect of things. The new aspect on things is that they are now seen as wanted, redeemed, and guided by a personal God, and we understand ourselves to be created, redeemed, and subject to divine providence in a more excellent way.

The Christian distinction and the new aspects and profiles it makes possible are not merely contemplative, but also call for a response on our part, a response that is made possible by the God to whom we are now called to pray. Prayer is part of the graced response called for by this new dimension of things visible to the one who has eyes to see. Given this new profile, the things we need to live and to flourish, our daily bread, are now presented to us as things to be asked for in prayer, and thus the way to attain them involves beseeching God for them in faith. As we move to the theological realm, where the *imago Dei* is reformed by grace,¹¹¹ the ordinary things in the world now manifest themselves as creatures of the Most Holy Trinity, and the response of the Christian in prayer is to praise the creator for his great gifts and to ask him for the necessities of life. Things "show up" as gifts of the triune God. *The same* realities that can be studied in terms of act and potency now show up as occasions of prayer, praise, and thanksgiving, and therefore the identity of things is intensified for the Christian believer. For the metaphysician, the entities in the world manifest themselves as things to be analyzed and contemplated. It is illuminating in this regard to contrast Aristotle's probing investigations of plant and animal life with St. Francis's *Cantico delle creature*, in which Francis praises God for Brother Sun and Sister Moon. The move from

¹¹⁰ Sokolowski, *Christian Faith and Human Understanding*, 46.

¹¹¹ For Aquinas's "stages" of the *imago Dei*, see *ST I*, q. 93, a. 4.

metaphysics to Christian prayer comes with the recognition of the Christian distinction, but this recognition is itself a gift of grace elevating the human mind and heart.

In the first part of this article, we discussed Aquinas's understanding of prayer as the "interpreter of our desires" for God, and we said that due to grace and charity our desires are healed, transformed, and lifted into a new trajectory. We can now add that, due to the new dimension of things manifest in the light of faith, human desires also appear in a new light. Because those desires are healed and elevated and the mind of the believer is enlightened by faith, human desires present themselves in a new way. The Christian recognizes his most fundamental desires as given by God and in need of God's intimate direction. His desires now present themselves as needing to be conformed to God's will, revealed in the person of Jesus Christ and transmitted in Sacred Scripture, Tradition, and the Church's magisterial teachings. Part of this new profile on our transformed desires is the realization that the restructuring and redirection of our affective life is to be done only with God's help. Thus, our desires themselves are now seen to have a new aspect, a new dimension; they display themselves as needing to be conformed to the loving will of the Father in and through prayer, and prayer itself is revealed as the means through which God himself shapes and directs our desires.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, but not only there, Jesus manifests what it is to align our wills and desires to the will of God in prayer, and we are called to imitate Jesus's intelligent abandonment to the Father in and through prayer, an imitation made possible by God's gift of grace flowing from the Incarnation, passion, death, and resurrection of Christ. We should note that Jesus's obedience to the Father is possible because of the Incarnation. Only as human, as exercising a human nature with a fully human intellect and will, can Jesus obey his Father and our Father, and thus the Incarnation is the prime display of what obedience and service to God look like in and through prayer. Through the Incarnation, we can be taught that our ultimate desire must be "thy will be done." In the supernatural realm, as in the natural, ontology and manifestation go hand-in-hand.

The new profile introduced by Christianity touches upon more than entities and our desires. The events of human life, the chosen, the unplanned, and the tragic, are seen as the expression of the loving plan of an omnipotent God that Christians rightly address as "Our Father," and even suffering is no longer seen as a brute fact. Suffering presents itself as allowed by God, as having a deeper intelligibility, and as meant to help human persons grow in faith, hope, and charity; human suffering now appears as an opportunity for intimate union with the suffering and

crucified Christ. All these transformations in presentation are necessary structures of manifestation in Christian life, but they are possible because the God who reveals himself to us is known as one who is so transcendent to the world he freely creates that he can become incarnate within it without ceasing to be God or destroying the natures in the world; he can be addressed as "Our Father" who knows how to and wants to give good gifts to his adopted children. As our knowledge of God is enhanced by faith, the world and our lives also appear in a new light, making Christian prayer possible and reasonable.

Conclusion

In closing, we will briefly make one final point and answer two possible objections to our reflections on metaphysics and prayer. In the first section, we discussed Aquinas's articulation of the Aristotelian idea that the human function (*ergon*) is the activity of the soul in accordance with reason, and, given the points we have made throughout this essay, it is illuminating to compare this Aristotelian concept with the opening lines of St. Augustine's *Confessions*. Within the new context opened by Christianity, the activities of the soul in accordance with reason, healed and elevated by grace, are now seen to culminate in the works of prayer, praise, and worship of the creator who reveals himself as savior in the Incarnation. St. Augustine captures this refined function of man once he is set within the context of creation and redemption:

Great are you, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is your power, and your wisdom is infinite. And man desires to praise you, since he is a part of your creation. Man bears his mortality about with him and carries the evidence of his sin and the proof that you resist the proud. Yet he desires to praise you, this man who is but a small part of your creation. You excite us to delight in praising you, for you have made us to yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.¹¹²

In this famous text, we see that Augustine, aided by his understanding of creation and redemption, identifies our end with our beginning, and he says that Christians desire to return to this origin-end through acts of prayer and praise, which are now seen as part of the perfection of Christian life. By comparing the *ergon* of man according to Aristotle and St.

¹¹² St. Augustine, *Confessions* 1.1.1, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Doubleday, 1960). I have slightly modified Ryan's translation.

Augustine, we can see that the question of “what man is” is always linked to the question of “how the world manifests itself to him.” All the thinkers we have drawn from in this essay are realists, and consequently they recognize that each person sees the world itself through the prism of his own character. As Aristotle says, it is the virtuous man who can see the world as it really is, and therefore he is the rule and measure of human action because he submits himself to the way things show themselves.¹¹³ The Christian distinction adds another dimension to this classical idea. The person reformed by grace can see the truth of things as they manifest themselves to the glory of their creator, ruler, and redeemer. The Christian can recognize and respond to the deepest truth of things because he has been healed, elevated, and perfected by God’s redemptive actions, and so he can be a more vivid rule and measure precisely because he is more fully ruled and measured by God.

We now turn to the first objection. One might argue that we have too radically separated metaphysics and prayer and that we have exalted prayer and the Christian conception of God to the denigration of metaphysics. However, such an objection would miss the continuity between the natural and supernatural, and therefore we must add that the forgoing discussion should not be manipulated to conclude that metaphysics is vacuous for the Christian; on the contrary, metaphysical knowledge retains its own perfection under the action of grace. Metaphysical speculation undertaken from the philosophical perspective pertains to natural necessities and excellences, and the knowledge contemplated by the metaphysician is in a sense more fitting to the human person *qua* agent of truth, while Christian prayer is more perfective absolutely speaking as it stems from the order of redemption. However, the natural is never destroyed by grace; it is rather healed and perfected. Thus, even within the life of a believer, there remains the “natural moment” of the search for the knowledge perfective of the human person as an agent of truth. As Thomas Joseph White says:

The orders of theological faith and human philosophical reason, while distinguishable, are not intended to be separated but tend inherently under grace toward greater and greater mutual interaction and, in a qualified way, toward mutual influence. But it is equally the case that they also tend precisely insofar as they mutually influence each other to become each more themselves, in terms of their own inner tendencies and capacities. The person of faith becomes more aware over time of the primacy and distinctness of

¹¹³ See *NE* 3.4.1113a22–b1.

the supernatural with respect to the natural, but the philosophical believer also becomes equally aware over time of the integrity or dignity of philosophical argument as such, according to its own inner structure and teleological orientation, in distinction from theological understanding and argumentation.¹¹⁴

It is important to note that philosophy and theology can positively influence each other because both are modes of wisdom. As Aristotle says, it belongs to the wise man to order, and thus the introduction of a superior kind of wisdom through grace does not destroy or sweep away the philosophical realm, but rather incorporates it within a higher order.

As for the second objection, one might argue that our integration of Thomistic metaphysics and phenomenology, and thus our use of speculative theology and the theology of disclosure, is arbitrary or unhelpful. One could claim that Husserlian phenomenology and Thomistic metaphysics, and the theologies developed from them, are disparate and do not illuminate each other. However, as we have shown, these two modes of thinking do reinforce and complement one another. Sokolowski says that each of the three kinds of theological reflection (positive theology, speculative theology, and the theology of disclosure) has not only its characteristic strengths but also its characteristic pitfall, its unique kind of error or extreme toward which it can tend and which its practitioners must be careful to avoid.¹¹⁵ Speculative theology and the metaphysics it builds upon can fall into “rationalism,” the failure to respect the transcendence of faith and revelation to reason and philosophy, and such thinking can neglect the philosophical order of discovery. Phenomenology and the theology of disclosure, by contrast, can fall into “psychologism,” the reduction of entities, objects, and states of affairs to human projections, mental acts, or mere appearances in the human psyche.¹¹⁶

Integrating speculative theology and the theology of disclosure, and hence Thomistic metaphysics and Husserlian phenomenology, as we have done in this essay, assists thinkers in avoiding the pitfalls of rationalism and psychologism. The theology of disclosure shows the formal structures of appearance

¹¹⁴ Thomas Joseph White, “Engaging the Thomistic Tradition and Contemporary Culture Simultaneously: A Response to Burrell, Healy, and Schindler,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 10 (2012): 605–23, at 622.

¹¹⁵ See Sokolowski, *Theology of Disclosure*, 7–9.

¹¹⁶ Recognizing these characteristic possibilities for error is certainly not to claim that Aquinas himself fell into the trap of rationalism, nor is it to claim that phenomenology is necessarily psychologistic.

of “Christian things” and thereby manifests how the transcendence of faith to philosophy is revealed without denigrating the natural excellences of human reason. By describing the necessary structures of appearance of entities and states of affairs, phenomenology enables metaphysics to remain rooted in human experience and to avoid the temptation to remain only on the level of a “logical analysis of concepts and of the reasoning connected therewith” in which “the categories employed risk having a content devoid of much density or flexibility.”¹¹⁷ By providing a disciplined and systematic reflection on being and its causes, Thomistic metaphysics enables phenomenology to remain true to its nature as a reflection on the ways in which *beings* manifest themselves as they are. By integrating these two approaches, we are better equipped to avoid the errors we have identified because we have a fuller philosophical and theological account of the realities that are manifest in human experience but transcend it.

In conclusion, Aquinas’s reflections on formal causality and natural inclinations provides an important resource for both metaphysics and speculative theology. In line with Thomas’s thinking, we can see metaphysics as the interpreter of our natural desire for knowledge of being and its causes. Analogously, Christian prayer, as an effect of charity and situated within the framework of the Christian distinction and the dimension it opens for believers, is the interpreter of our supernatural desires for union with and service to the triune God. We can therefore see Athens and Jerusalem, and the activities they represent, as seats of desire for God and the “interpretation” of these desires, both natural and supernatural.¹¹⁸ NIV

¹¹⁷ These descriptions of the possible pitfalls of Thomism come from Louis de Raeymaecker, “What St. Thomas Means Today,” *The Review of Politics* 20 (1958): 3–20, at 19. On the same page, de Raeymaecker says, as we did in the previous footnote, that Aquinas himself did not fall prey to these errors. He notes that while Aquinas’s philosophy is rooted in experience, as all philosophy must be, it is “permissible to regret that the Angelic doctor has not left us a description—let us call it a phenomenological one—of the living basis of his theories. This basis he has at his disposal throughout his philosophic work.” As we have shown, phenomenology complements Aquinas’s work by providing a “phenomenological description” of the “living basis” of philosophical theories.

¹¹⁸ I wish to thank Fr. Stephen Brock, Fr. Cassian Derbes, O.P., Fr. Robert Sokolowski, and Christopher Kaczor for helpful conversations about the issues discussed in this article. Their generous comments improved the essay but are not, of course, the cause of its shortcomings.