

Discovering the Given: On Reason and God

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IN HIS first publication,¹ which launched a career devoted in significant part to philosophizing in light of and in relation to Catholic faith, Robert Spaemann pointed out a certain irony in the famous passage from the Vatican I document *Dei Filius*, in which the Church affirms that anyone who claims that the existence of God, as the “*principium et finis omnium rerum*,” cannot be known with certainty by the natural light of reason thereby separates himself from the Church:² the document does not offer rational arguments for the existence of God, but simply asserts the principle that such arguments can be given. The assent that such an assertion demands is not the agreement that reason comes to at the end of a demonstration, but rather that of obedience to authority. The irony, in other words, is that this assertion of reason is not reason’s self-assertion; it is instead the call for an act of faith, which goes beyond reason, though does so in this case only to give reason an inviolable space of its own. But there is indeed a further irony in this passage: the Church does not say, here, that one who denies reason this great power excludes himself from the community of knowers (though of course the passage does not exclude this implication) but specifically from the Church, that is, from the *community of believers*. Just as one may fairly assert that it can be reasonable to affirm something beyond reason, here we have faith insisting that faith, as it were, is not everything, but has room *inside* of itself—if we may put it thus—for something outside of itself.

As Spaemann goes on to explain in this essay, drawing on St. Thomas Aquinas, such a safeguarding of reason by faith, though not necessary

¹ Robert Spaemann, “Der Irrtum des Traditionalisten: Zur Soziologisierung der Gottesidee im 19. Jahrhundert,” in *Wort und Wahrheit* 8 (1953): 493–98.

² See *Dei Filius*, Canon II.1. Cf., chapter two of the same document.

essentially and in principle, may become indispensable in certain historical circumstances. In his recent book, *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity*,³ Fr. Thomas Joseph White suggests that the age in which we live, an age characterized largely by disillusionment regarding reason's capacity to discern a plausible meaning for human existence, presents just such circumstances (xvii). To evoke the tenor of our age, Fr. White appeals to the image of the "mid-winter spring" from T. S. Eliot's "Little Gidding": we live at present in the midst of a long and cold winter's day. And yet, though its heat may not directly be felt, the sun—the source of all light, acknowledged in the classical tradition as a privileged symbol of reason—continues to shine, with a constancy that thus may nourish the hope for a new spring.

Fr. White's book seeks to promote this renewal. By drawing on the deep resources of the classical tradition, principally Aristotle and Aquinas, he aims to provide an apology for natural theology, that is, for reason's capacity to come to know God as the transcendent cause of the cosmos. Though such an aim is by no means novel, what distinguishes his particular effort is its being made specifically in response to what he describes as the modern and postmodern critique of "ontotheology" (which we shall discuss below) and his accompanying critical evaluation of various recent interpretations of Aquinas, especially of three well-known twentieth-century Thomists who pursued, at least in part, a similar aim: Étienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain, and Karl Rahner.

In the following essay, we will offer a "nutshell" account of the main line of Fr. White's argument as we understand it, and point out what we take to be the importance of some of Fr. White's insights and basic interpretive positions. After this, we will argue that some of these insights threaten to be undermined by the line of reasoning he develops ostensibly in support of them. We will thus try to show that the positive achievement of Fr. White's book would require a development of thinking in a somewhat different direction, indeed, ultimately in a direction that Fr. White explicitly excludes. We will argue that, insofar as he excludes that direction, the basic position he defends is a problematic one. Our most basic aim in this essay, however, is not to criticize Fr. White's book, but rather to take a discussion of various claims he makes therein as an occasion to explore and reflect on fundamental questions regarding reason's relationship to God.

³ Thomas Joseph White, O.P., *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity: A Study in Thomistic Natural Theology* (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2009). All unattributed parenthetical references in the text are to this work.

I

Fr. White develops his account of how natural reason is able to attain positive knowledge of God in some legitimate sense apart from revelation in response to two fundamental objections that he says one frequently encounters in modern thought (3–6; 282). The first comes from philosophy, and claims that it is not possible to come to knowledge of God unless one already posits the existence of God at the outset in an a priori way, which is ultimately without warrant. He refers to this objection as the critique of ontotheology, a critique originally formulated by Kant and then reformulated in a more postmodern idiom by Heidegger.⁴ Because of its aprioristic character, ontotheological thinking does not yield authentic knowledge of God. To the contrary, it reduces God, according to Fr. White's account, to the immanent structures of human thinking, turning God, in the end, into the ultimate explanatory principle of human understanding governed by a "quasi-univocal" logic.⁵ This points, then, to the second, more directly theological, objection to natural knowledge of God, which we find perhaps most representatively in the work of Karl Barth, though it has clear roots in Luther's "sola fide."⁶ According to this objection, the aspiration to natural knowledge arises from our concupiscence, insofar as it represents a disordered desire to *take* knowledge of God for ourselves, as it were, rather than to receive it as a gift. To insist on natural theology would be to elevate human reason in a way that compromises God's sovereignty. Both the philosophical and theological objections may be said to converge in a rejection of "conceptual idolatry," by which we divinize the products of our own thinking, however different the two objections may be in the motives they ascribe to this divinizing or the genealogy they trace for it.

In response to these objections, Fr. White develops a natural theology based on essentially a posteriori argumentation, which begins with a realist epistemology, proceeds from the things we experience in the world, drawing from that experience a genuinely metaphysical conception of being in terms of the categories of substance and accidents, act and potency, and finally moves from this conception to the ultimate cause of

⁴ *Wisdom*, 24. For Fr. White, the essential difference is that the problem of ontotheology in Kant is a necessary implication of the structure of human thinking, whereas, for Heidegger, it is due to the "*unnecessary constructions* of the thinking subject" (ibid.).

⁵ Although he presents ontotheology in chapter 1 of *Wisdom*, 3–30 and discusses it throughout the book, Fr. White's most succinct description can be found on 96–97.

⁶ Fr. White traces the crisis of natural theology essentially back to Luther, although he also cites Alain de Libera's suggestion that the more philosophical guise of the problem originates in Scotus's reformulation of Avicenna's metaphysics: see 4–7; 25fn51.

being, namely, God, through a disciplined application of the unique interpretation of analogy offered by Aquinas. While this progression of reason, he affirms, does indeed yield positive knowledge of the essence of God, it nevertheless brings to light at the same time, and precisely by virtue of its analogous character, the “radical incompleteness” of this knowledge (252; 273–74). In so doing, it does not in the least pre-empt the direct knowledge that God offers of himself to human reason in the gift of revelation. Quite to the contrary—and Fr. White’s presentation is particularly compelling on this point—since a negation can occur only in relation to some affirmation, the very positivity of natural knowledge does not threaten but rather allows us to deepen the mind’s openness to what lies beyond that knowledge. Thus conceived, natural knowledge of God answers both the philosophical and the theological objections mentioned above. It avoids both the Scylla of “immanentism,” which would eclipse God’s transcendence through the restriction of theology to the limits of natural reason, as well as the Charybdis of “extrinsicism,” which would concede a wholly secular form to human reason and make revelation and grace therefore altogether foreign to human nature. It does so through a sophisticated interpretation of analogy, which highlights in an uncommon way the importance of Aristotle.

At the heart of Fr. White’s project is the development of a robust account of what he calls the “*via inventionis*,” the path of discovery, by which reason in its specifically philosophical mode reflects on the objects of experience and moves in a methodical way to the ultimate cause of those effects. This path has as its correlate the “*via iudicii*,” which figures much less significantly in Fr. White’s account (we will return to this point below), and which complements the movement of the prior *via* by exercising judgment on reason’s starting points in the light of more ultimate discoveries.⁷ Fr. White argues that the *via inventionis* has a complex inner structure, which, if followed faithfully, leads to a non-ontotheological form of natural knowledge of God that does not falsely anticipate and thus compromise the novelty of revelation. The essence of his critique of the three twentieth-century Thomists he treats is that each of them short-

⁷ See *Wisdom*, xxix. Fr. White’s description differs somewhat from Aquinas’s own, as Aquinas presents it in the text cited by Fr. White, namely, *ST* 1.79.8. According to Aquinas, in the way of judgment, reason returns to the first principles in order to judge the conclusions in *their* light. Aquinas is making the point, here, that the simple apprehension of first principles—by intellectus—is the beginning and end of all discursive movement by ratio. His description of the two paths is, in this respect, a sort of exitus and reditus movement of ratio with respect to the intellective “rest” of the unmoving first principles.

circuited crucial aspects of this path, so to speak, skipped over essential steps of the journey, and so ended up falling into just the sort of ontotheological dead-end the path is meant to circumvent. The great importance of Aristotle—whom Fr. White claims contemporary Thomists have tended to underestimate and who stands behind Aquinas almost as the true protagonist of this book—lies in the fact that he traced out the basic itinerary of the *via inventionis*, even if Aquinas provided decisive re-interpretations of that itinerary in the light of revelation.

To oversimplify Fr. White's account to a certain extent,⁸ the *via inventionis* prevents an over-hasty leap into the theological by requiring a patient analysis of the being that we encounter in our ordinary experiences, first in terms of its *intrinsic* causes (substance and accidents) and then in terms of its *extrinsic* causes (the categories of act and potency become crucial here). The first analysis considers being in its first act, by which it is what it is, while the second considers being in its second act, that is, in terms of its operations, by which it makes fully actual what it is and so attains its perfection. These analyses involve above all two forms of analogy that Aristotle introduced and Aquinas subsequently took over, namely, the analogy of proper proportionality, by which relations between diverse things and their properties are compared (*A is to B as C is to D*), and the "*pros hen*" or *ad unum* analogy (sometimes called the analogy of proportion or analogy of attribution), by which one or many things are compared to an other, which is primary. As Aristotle observed, being is not a genus, which can be understood by abstraction from all specific differences, but is distributed among all the categories differently in each case. To acquire an adequate concept of being therefore requires a comparison of the different ways in which being manifests itself. We thus compare accidents to substance, and the act-potency polarity across the different modes of being's realization. But the reflection on substance in terms of act and potency moves reason to consider the transcendent cause of substances, and so discloses the separate substance(s) as primary. Because this ontological primacy, however, is decidedly *not* a logical priority, in the sense that we would have to understand the cause first in order to understand the effects, Fr. White insists that Aristotle does not fall prey to an ontotheological conception of metaphysics.⁹

⁸ Fr. White's account is far richer than we indicate here. The impressive sophistication of his presentation of natural reason's acquisition of analogical knowledge of God is one of the real merits of his book.

⁹ See *Wisdom*, 64–66. Fr. White justifies Aristotle in the face of this critique, not so much on the grounds of a particular conception of God's transcendence of the world (which is certainly at the very least ambiguous in Aristotle), as in terms of his methodology: according to Fr. White, Aristotle does not *presuppose* a

What, then, does Aquinas add to what we already have in Aristotle? According to Fr. White, Aquinas's contribution, with respect to the question of natural theology, lies not simply in *adding* something, namely, the novelty of Christian revelation, but perhaps even more significantly in preserving what is old, so to speak, within the new context that transforms it. Thus, he introduces a third kind of analogy to the two one finds in Aristotle, in order to clarify whatever ambiguity there may be regarding God's transcendence of the world, but he does so without eliminating the richly analogical sense of being founded in ordinary experience of the world that Aristotle offers. This new kind is the "*ad alterum*" analogy, which Aquinas explicitly distinguishes from the *ad unum* analogy that would threaten to lead us to think of the difference between God and the world as encompassed by a single order of being (88–94). This new form of analogy, based on a notion of God as creator, and thus of the world as entirely dependent on him in every respect, excludes the positing of a common ratio shared between cause and effect. God infinitely transcends the world. This means that the nature of God cannot be grasped intuitively, apprehended *per se*, or represented in any adequate sense by the knowledge we have of creatures.

Nevertheless, as we discover especially at the end of Fr. White's book, this does not mean that we are left with a radical apophaticism that would deny any positive natural knowledge whatever. To prepare for this argument, Fr. White makes the claim that, although the *ad alterum* analogy is primary for Aquinas, he does not simply reject the role played by the other two modes. In the middle chapters of his book, Fr. White attempts to show, through a discussion of the three modern Thomists, what happens when one focuses in too exclusive a manner on one sort of analogy in one's philosophy, even if that happens to be the *ad alterum* analogy that Aquinas identifies as appropriate in our thinking about God, to the exclusion of the other two. The tendency toward ontotheology, that is, the compromise of God's transcendence through the absorption of the being of the first cause into a metaphysical horizon, might be fairly evident in the exclusive use of the analogy of proper proportionality (in which the things compared share a common ratio) or of the *ad unum* analogy (in which many things are related to a "one" that represents their ground), which Fr. White attributes to Maritain and Rahner respectively, but somewhat more surprisingly he believes Gilson falls into ontotheology, so to

conception of God as the *a priori* starting point for his reflection, which is why he cannot be said to commit the fault of ontotheological thinking. We will discuss the implications of a primarily methodological conception of ontotheology below.

speak, from the other direction because of an overemphasis on the third form. In this case, we have, more specifically, a “theo-ontology,” in which the distinction between being and God is collapsed, not by reducing God to the horizon of common being, but rather by reducing common being, as it were, to the horizon of God’s being (117–20). The reason this move is problematic is that if we leap over the causal analysis of created being and proceed immediately to God, we will tend to impoverish the notions that are meant precisely to illuminate our understanding of God, so that we will require God’s own self-revelation to compensate. It is not an accident, according to Fr. White, that Gilson apparently fell into crisis regarding the question how one was to demonstrate the real distinction between essence and esse in dialogue with Scotists, for example, or other non-Thomists, and to *explain* the meaning of esse, the act of being which represents the perfection of all perfections. As a result of this crisis, Gilson was eventually led to posit God’s revelation of himself as “I am who am”—or rather, to highlight Aquinas’s own positing of this revelation—as the origin of the notion of esse. By thus substituting the work of grace for that of reason, Fr. White claims, Gilson thereby abandoned the possibility of a meaningful natural theology (129–32).

In the last—and perhaps most compelling—part of his book, Fr. White distinguishes his own position from those of other contemporary Thomists. On the one hand, there are the Aristotelian Thomists, such as Ralph McInerny, who insist that we must begin thinking with natural philosophy as a way to the notion of an unmoved mover, and so to the concept of a “separate substance,” that is necessary for metaphysics proper. Fr. White argues that these thinkers fail to see that the notions employed in physics are always already metaphysical, and also end up including God within metaphysics, rather than adhering to the proper order of the *via inventionis* (204–16). According to the path of discovery, God enters metaphysics, *not* as its subject (as would be the case in ontotheology), but strictly speaking *only insofar* as God is the *cause* of its subject, that is, being. On the other hand, against contemporary Thomists such as Denys Turner who he claims “overemphasize” the apophatic element in Aquinas’s thought, Fr. White argues that, even if God is not the *subject* of metaphysics, the *via inventionis* nevertheless opens up to *genuinely positive* knowledge of God. As a sort of counterpart to Gilson, Turner highlights the philosophical darkness, we might say, of the concept of esse outside of God’s self-revelation, a concept to which we attain, for Turner, through a reflection on nothingness—which Fr. White points out is merely conceptual because it cannot be encountered anywhere in experience. What is missing in Turner’s approach, for Fr. White, is once again the priority of a causal analysis of being, by which we gradually enrich

our understanding of *esse* through a posteriori reflections on the beings we encounter in the world rather than through an aprioristic conception of absolute nothingness. In this latter case, we would be looking at the world too immediately, so to speak, from God's perspective, and would fail to undertake the patient labor of metaphysical reflection (265).

What this renewed emphasis on the *via inventionis* brings home is that, to say it again, God does not lie *within* the horizon of metaphysics, which is what the critique of ontotheology charges, but is nevertheless approached most truly by metaphysical reflection, and specifically *that* metaphysical reflection which faithfully follows the itinerary of the *via inventionis*. According to this approach, in a nutshell, reason comes to desire knowledge of the essence of causes through a contemplation of their effects. Thus, the path on which Fr. White takes thought reveals that reason *naturally* desires an end that *exceeds its nature*, and that, moreover, this incompleteness is something that reason discovers in its own operations, rigorously followed out to their proper ends, so that one cannot insist that revelation is necessary in principle to bring this incompleteness to light (287–88). Such a conception, according to Fr. White, is crucial for us to be able to say, as we must, that revelation brings a novelty to reason, that is, that it introduces insight into God in a wholly gratuitous manner, a knowledge that reason cannot grasp on the basis of its own resources alone, and yet at the very same time it introduces this insight as something that is not simply *foreign* to reason, but rather fulfills its deepest aspiration.

As Fr. White sees it, natural reason leads us genuinely to the threshold of the order of grace and revelation, if not in fact over it. He explains that we can best formulate this complex idea by saying that philosophy ultimately posits the existence of God—that is, it tells us simply *that* God exists—but that theology's essential role is eventually to tell us *who* or *what* God is.¹⁰ Only God's gratuitous invitation into his inner life—which as subsistent intellect and will in which subject and object are identical *is the wisdom itself* of which our metaphysical aspirations in the face of modernity are a mere, a glorious, image—is able to bring to completion the longings of the human heart.

¹⁰ "A philosophical and Thomistic emphasis on our knowledge *that* God exists, and our simultaneously radical ignorance of *what* God is, demonstrates the profound compatibility between Thomistic natural theology, and the claims of Christian divine revelation. Revelation is the answer of who or what God is, responding to the void in our knowledge of God that philosophy helps us to identify. This position seems comprehensive, insofar as it seeks to be a multi-sided response to the above-mentioned difficulties"—that is, concerning the avoidance of both philosophical agnosticism and a rationalist presumptuousness. *Wisdom*, 253–54.

There are a number of things to praise about *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity*. A vigorous defense of the scope and capacity of reason is no doubt one of the greatest needs of our age, and Fr. White provides this not only in terms of the central aim of the book—namely, to demonstrate the viability of natural knowledge of God—but also through the means by which he accomplishes this aim. A sustained philosophical argument, which patiently follows each of the paths it requires and which shows a careful attention to texts, is increasingly uncommon in the contemporary American academy. At the very same time, he insists on the modesty of reason, which is paradoxically just as urgent a reminder in our age as the former. While precisely the opposite may seem to be true, in fact the genuine modesty of reason cannot be separated from its strength, and vice versa. Fr. White demonstrates this paradox in his very helpful critique of Denys Turner's negative theology as he describes it in the book's final chapter (255–68). Turner is well known for his insistence on natural reason's ultimate inability to know anything about God's nature, and yet, as Fr. White respectfully points out, this excessive apophaticism results from a radical sense of contingency that is based on something that lies outside of any possible experience, namely, the concept of absolute nothingness, out of which God created. In this case, reason simultaneously knows both too much and too little: it begins, not with anything *given* in actual experience, but with its own projected concept, which in fact involves what Fr. White suggests is a presumptuous insight into God's intentions in creating, and it is this very presumption that eventually leads reason to an empty silence regarding the nature of God. Its very "pre-emptive" conception of absolute nothingness makes reason improperly passive with respect to God's self-revelation once it comes.

In contrast to presumptuous passivity, Fr. White argues for the paradox of a *natural* desire for what lies *beyond nature*, which he rightly observes is the only way to avoid an extrincism between faith and reason without at the same time falling into an immanentism that would reduce faith to reason. What is certainly Fr. White's most important contribution to the discussion is his sophisticated interpretation of the three different senses of analogy in Aquinas, which balances the more apophatic aspect of the *ad alterum* analogy with the more positive aspects of the other two types. While it is true that Aquinas identifies the first as the only appropriate analogy with respect to God,¹¹ to isolate this analogy from the others

¹¹ As Fr. White observes, Aquinas explicitly states that "*only the ad alterum attribution is valid for the creature/God relation*" in *ST I*, q. 13, a. 5 (see *Wisdom*, 90fns67–68; 90–91). Fr. White qualifies this statement shortly thereafter, however, by explaining that Aquinas speaks favorably of the analogy of proper proportionality in his

would significantly impoverish the concept of being we analogously attribute to God, and indeed would tempt us to substitute our intuitive leap to God—which Fr. White repeatedly criticizes as “aprioristic”—for the progressive development of a posteriori reflection. Fr. White helpfully observes that God is not revealed exclusively through the medium of existence, but also through essences, or in other words, the meaning of God comes to expression also in creatures (259–60). To find God, we might say, reason may not leap over or otherwise bypass the world through some aprioristic vision, but must rather patiently and attentively work its way through the world. One is reminded here of Hegel’s criticism of Schelling, whose philosophy of religion seemed to Hegel to be “shot from a pistol.”¹² In more technical language, God is indeed not in any direct manner the *subject* of metaphysics, but is rather the *cause* of its subject, which is *being qua being*. Reason’s natural desire for God therefore leads it in some sense first into the being of the world, and only then into its transcendent principle. This is a principle that we cannot forget without far-reaching deleterious consequences for both reason and faith. Fr. White’s emphasis on the causal analysis of being as an indispensable moment of natural theology is crucial in this regard.

II

On the other hand, however, there are a number of philosophical decisions that Fr. White makes that, we hope to show, are not necessary to his essential positions and, moreover, in certain important respects weaken or even work against the very contributions his book offers. As we will see, these tend to concern not so much his positive claims as it does what he believes these claims have to exclude. It is not, of course, possible to comment on every argument constructed in the book, though his claims are so interesting and provocative that one is quite tempted to do so. Nor is there space here to pass judgment on the accuracy of his interpretations in every particular case. It would quickly become too complex to try to

more mature commentaries on Aristotle; with reference to an essay by Leo Elders, though, he claims that one ought not to exaggerate the discontinuities between Aquinas’s early and later texts (92fn70). It is important for Fr. White to make this point because, as we have mentioned, he wishes to raise a criticism of what he says is Gilson’s too exclusive use of the *ad alterum* analogy.

¹² Although Hegel did not mention Schelling by name, it is clear that he has his old seminary roommate in mind when he criticizes the “rapturous enthusiasm which, like a shot from a pistol, begins straight away with absolute knowledge, and makes short work of other standpoints by declaring that it takes no notice of them.” Preface, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 16.

sort out, for example, Fr. White's interpretation of Gilson's interpretation of Aquinas's interpretation of Aristotle's interpretation of reality, and in any event such an endeavor can only be of secondary importance in the end.¹³ Instead, we will focus on certain basic positions that Fr. White adopts and judgments he makes, which we will evaluate on their own merits and above all in terms of their logical implications, leaving open in the present context the question to what extent his account of Maritain, for example, or Aquinas is an adequate one. As far as those questions go, the best hermeneutical approach is no doubt the one Eric Voegelin offers in another context (and that approach incidentally reflects the Catholic spirit of St. Ignatius): when one is faced with textual ambiguities in the writings of a great thinker that allow several possible readings, the best interpretation is always the most profound one.

Fr. White, for his part, follows this principle with respect to Aristotle, when he rightly claims it is problematic to make him a simple foil against which to demonstrate the novelty of Christianity, as certain Thomists have a tendency to do (33). His book is a testimony to the way one's thinking can be enriched if one avoids such a temptation. On the other hand, however, Fr. White himself falls to this temptation in his reading of other thinkers, and his own reflections are the worse for it. We will begin our assessment by focusing on just two examples, which prove to be decisive for Fr. White's book. On the one hand, there is Fr. White's reading of Plato, whom he presents, so to speak, as a simple foil against which to demonstrate the novelty of Aristotle. On the other hand, there is his reading of Heidegger, in particular the philosopher's notion of "ontotheology," which is pivotal for Fr. White's general argument since it sets the terms of the problem to which he intends to respond. To say it again, our point in discussing his interpretations of these two thinkers is not in the first case to quibble over the right reading of their work—indeed, to do so would require a lengthy presentation and comparison of texts, along with discussions of different scholarly judgments on them, for which there is no space in the present context—but rather to show the implications Fr. White's rather narrow interpretations have for the content of his own thinking.

Fr. White's interpretation of Plato boils down to two basic judgments: that Plato failed to come to any satisfactory articulation of the nature of wisdom, insofar as he offers a "progressively evolving" attempt (35), through

¹³ This is not to say that questions of the accuracy of interpretations are without significance even with respect to what we are proposing as being of primary importance, namely, the judgment of the truth and goodness of philosophical claims.

his early, middle, and late dialogues, to reach a goal that remained elusive; and, second, that he conceived the ultimate cause of the cosmos, namely, the good, in a strictly univocal fashion (38). One of the implications of this univocity is that Plato is led to identify what is first in the order of logic with what is first in the order of being—which, as we will see in a moment, is a primitive incidence of what Fr. White will call ontotheology. We will pass over Fr. White's first judgment, which presents a strangely flat-footed reading of Plato that demonstrates little sensitivity to the interpretive demands of the dialogue genre, not to mention the fact that the best recent scholarship on Plato, for good philosophical, historical, and philological reasons, no longer follows a simple "developmental" ordering of the dialogues.¹⁴ More directly relevant to the discussion to follow is the second judgment. Fr. White's suggestion that Plato reduced the good to what Aristotle calls the formal cause¹⁵ overlooks a host of claims Plato makes about the good in the main place in his corpus it arises, that is, books 6 and 7 of the *Republic*. There, Plato not only refers to the good as a "form," or more precisely, an "idea" (*Rep.*, 505a) (which does not have the technical meaning that "formal cause" has, though it is clearly related in some sense), but he also identifies it as the *source* of all being, truth and knowledge (*Rep.*, 509b) (that is, as what one might call the supreme "efficient" cause) and defines it as that which everyone desires in everything he does (*Rep.*, 505d–e) (that is, as a "final cause"). Moreover, it is just this "comprehensively causal" character, as it were, which is due to its ultimacy, that complicates our attempts to know it: the soul, he says, is "unable to get a sufficient grasp of just what it is" (505e). The good, for Plato, can never be a simple object for the mind, as is the univocal concept to which Fr. White reduces it, because it is the cause of the mind's objects and indeed of the very light by which the mind comes

¹⁴ Although non-developmental interpretations of Plato have never been lacking, we may fairly say that such interpretations have become mainstream in recent scholarship on Plato, at least among those outside of the analytic school. In 1991, Jacob Howland published an essay that demonstrated incontrovertibly that all of the attempts to establish a chronology of the dialogues are question-begging, resting on a set of prior assumptions about the content of that philosophy: see Howland, "Re-Reading Plato: The Problem of Platonic Chronology," *Phoenix* 45.3 (1991): 189–214.

¹⁵ According to Fr. White, in Plato, "as a universal form, the good is conceived in a strictly univocal fashion" (*Wisdom*, 38). He goes on to say that "Plato's quest for wisdom implies an identification of this wisdom with the form of the good, and entails a corresponding problem of how all things participate in this universal (univocal) form. . . . Aristotle, however, demonstrates that God (or the divine) cannot be the formal cause of the goodness of things" (*Wisdom*, 41).

to know them. As we have tried to show at length elsewhere,¹⁶ Plato articulates a very sophisticated analogy by which the mind progressively ascends toward the good, but at the same time finds its path reversed to the extent that the good, which the mind discovers only at the *end* of its thinking,¹⁷ is never *merely* the end but reveals itself at the same time and for the same reason as *prior* to everything that the mind has thought.

Plato calls the good the “unhypothetical first principle” (*Rep.*, 510b), which is a paradox. Normally, because one can never achieve an absolute perspective from which to start (pace transcendental idealism), the starting points of one’s thinking are relative and so conditional, requiring confirmation by other discoveries. This is what makes them “hypothetical,” meaning both what undergirds and thus supports one’s thinking, and also what depends on something other than itself for its own truth. But the good, which is for Plato *absolutely first*, is a governing principle of thought without being conditional: its truth does not depend on something else, that is, it cannot be demonstrated in terms of something more fundamental and thereby confirmed, but for this very reason it cannot be a simple starting point for thinking. The good is therefore not an “aprioristic” concept from which one starts as a secure possession and which therefore “grounds” all of one’s subsequent thinking; instead, it is as he famously says, “beyond being” (*Rep.*, 509b), which means in this context that, because being is the proper object of reason (*Rep.*, 477c–d; 478a), the good *is prior to the beginning*, just as it is *posterior to the end*. The a priority of the a posteriori, if we may put the paradox thus, is arguably the hallmark of the Platonic tradition in matters of natural theology; we will return to its significance with respect to Fr. White’s general argument in a moment.

Fr. White’s treatment of Plato is not unrelated to the account he offers of Heidegger’s critique of ontotheology. The issue in this case is not so much a facile dismissal as an oversimplification, which has an even more direct bearing since Fr. White constructs his interpretation of Aquinas (and various Thomists) precisely in response to and in the terms set by what he identifies as ontotheology. According to Fr. White, the core problem that Heidegger refers to as the “onto–theo–logical constitution of metaphysics” that defines Western thinking is that it

¹⁶ D. C. Schindler, *Plato’s Critique of Impure Reason: On Goodness and Truth in the Republic* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University Press of America, 2008), 139–75.

¹⁷ “At all events, this is the way the phenomena look to me: in the knowable the last thing to be seen, and that with considerable effort, is the *idea* of the good; but once seen, it must be concluded that this is in fact the cause of all that is right and fair in everything.” *Rep.*, 517b–c.

attempts to study the conditions of existence for any possible being. To do so it must have recourse to a consideration of the immanent laws of human systematic thinking (i.e., principles of causality and sufficient reason) that are employed when metaphysicians attempt to explain sensible reality. The use of these principles eventually requires (or invites) the invocation of an aprioristic concept of God in order to explain the sum total of all possible knowledge and experience. This structure of thinking places God at the summit of the science of metaphysics and simultaneously makes him the ultimate explanatory principle of human understanding. God is thereby assimilated by natural theology into its own systematic representation of "being," and in this process the divine is inevitably conceived . . . as the "supreme being" who alone is self-caused (*causa sui*). (96–97)

The oversimplification that occurs in Fr. White's interpretation of the critique of ontotheology becomes apparent in the fact that he takes it ultimately to concern *methodology*. The next sentence after the text just cited runs: "By these standards of measure, however, Aquinas's methodological procedure cannot be characterized as ontotheological" (97). Whenever Fr. White mentions ontotheology, which represents as we have seen a central theme of his book, he essentially reduces it to a critique of "aprioristic" thinking about God.¹⁸ This is thinking that does not, so to speak, work its way gradually up to God (in a manner that leaves thinking open for revelation), but rather takes a concept of God for granted in one way or another as the basis of its interpretation of everything else: philosophical thinking *starts* with God, in other words, when it should rather *end* with him. *Because* this is the essence of the problem, as Fr. White sees it, a satisfying response requires little else, in the end, than developing a natural theology "that does not presuppose implicitly that which it seeks to attain by rational argument" (xxx), which means that, for a natural theology to be adequate, arguments for God must be "*uniquely* a posteriori" (97), based on experience of real beings rather than on concepts of possibility.

An even cursory consideration of what is no doubt Heidegger's most succinct explicit statement of the problem of ontotheology, a passage from the essay "The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics" that Fr. White himself cites (23–24fn49), suffices to show that the issue is not primarily one of methodology but one of substance (and *therefore* also of methodology):

¹⁸ See, e.g., *Wisdom*, xxx, xxii, 26, 29, 34, 64, 65, 97, 174, 191, 201, 204, 206, and so forth. Perhaps the clearest example of this association, which connects the problematic directly with the question of the philosophy-theology relationship, can be found on 249–50.

Because Being appears as ground, beings are what is grounded; the highest being, however, is what accounts in the sense of giving the first cause. When metaphysics thinks of being with respect to the ground that is common to all beings as such, then it is logic as onto-logic. When metaphysics thinks of beings as such as a whole, that is, with respect to the highest being which accounts for everything, then it is logic as theo-logic. . . . The onto-theological constitution of metaphysics stems from the prevalence of that difference which keeps Being as the ground, and beings as what is grounded and what gives account, apart from and related to each other; and by this keeping, perdurance is achieved. . . . The deity enters into philosophy through the perdurance . . . the perdurance results in and gives Being as the generative ground. This ground itself needs to be properly accounted for by that for which it accounts, that is, by the causation through the supremely original matter—and that is the cause as *causa sui*. This is the right name for the god of philosophy. Man can neither pray nor sacrifice to this god.¹⁹

As the text makes evident, the problem is not, in the first place, that one presupposes what one ought to prove—that is, it is not simply “aprioristic” thinking—but rather concerns most fundamentally our understanding of the nature of being, of the relationship that holds sway between being and beings, of cause, and of reason generally. Heidegger suggests that classical metaphysics tends to enclose reality, we might say, at its most basic level inside a relationship of ground to the grounded, so that even God himself is presented in essentially the same terms. In metaphysics, God appears as the “*causa sui*.” The upshot of such a conception is that nothing in the world stands outside of this essentially transitive relationship of one thing *acting on* another. One of the implications of ontotheology, in other words, is a world vulnerable to, and in fact positively inviting of, the tyranny of technology. This is why Heidegger responds to the problem, not, like Fr. White, by insisting on exclusively a posteriori reasoning, but rather by thinking of being in a way he takes to be radically different from the main current of the Western tradition: namely, most ultimately in un-grounded or non-causal terms. The strange language he uses—the “lighting” or “clearing,” the “Er-eignis,” the “Es gibt”—serves to evoke an attentiveness to the event of the “thereness” of being, which gives itself to our grateful thinking (*denken als danken*), without invoking a discrete cause that produces an effect. The disorientation that this alien idiom brings about is meant in part to make us fall

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, “The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics,” in *Identity and Difference*, trans. J. Staumbaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 42–74, here 70–72. Cited in *Wisdom*, 23–24fn49.

poetically silent before the mystery of being so that we may be alert to its own creative silence. The West has “forgotten” being because it has become incapable of meditative silence.

This is of course just a thumbnail sketch of one aspect of Heidegger’s critique. The point in raising this as a contrast to Fr. White’s understanding of the matter, to say it again, is not in the first place to make an argument about proper readings of Heidegger, nor is it to defend him or his critique of ontotheology. In fact, we have argued elsewhere that Catholics have generally been too quick to concede the terms of the problem Heidegger sets, and have typically responded only by showing why one figure or another ought to be excepted from his critique.²⁰ This is essentially what Fr. White does in the present book, specifically with respect to Aristotle and an Aristotelian reading of Aquinas. A more fundamental response would require challenging the basic presuppositions regarding the nature of God, cause, being, thinking, and philosophy that lie behind Heidegger’s critique.²¹

In the present context, there is of course no room to present such a challenge. We wish only to suggest here that a narrow interpretation of Heidegger’s critique will provoke a narrow response. An engagement with Heidegger ought to provide the occasion, not simply for the articulation of a “general order of metaphysical inquiry,”²² but more fundamentally for a reflection on the very nature of reason in its relation to being and to God. Indeed, a prioritizing of methodology is arguably an expression of the very technologizing of thinking that Heidegger had in mind in his critique, so that an argument for exclusively a posteriori reasoning offends the spirit precisely in (and because of) its attempt to obey the letter of that critique. In what follows we will try to show that Fr. White’s reductive interpretation of Heidegger, along with his facile dismissal of Plato, leads to problematically restrictive notions of both God and reason, and therefore to an inadequate conception of the relationship between philosophy and theology. More specifically, we will argue: (1) that the mode of reasoning that Fr. White champions finitizes God for the mind; (2) that the argument he advances for natural theology unreflectively presupposes

²⁰ D. C. Schindler, “*Wie kommt der Mensch in die Theologie?* Hegel, Heidegger, and the Stakes of Ontotheology,” *Revista Española de Teología* 65 (October–December 2005): 437–65.

²¹ In a footnote, Fr. White does cite positively one of the rare examples of a genuine “turning of the tables” on Heidegger, namely, David Bentley Hart’s essay “The Offering of Names: Metaphysics, Nihilism, and Analogy” in *Reason and the Reasons of Faith*, ed. Paul J. Griffiths and Reinhard Hütter (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 255–94, but he does not weigh the implications for his own discussion.

²² See chapter 7 of *Wisdom*, 201–50.

the modern impoverished conception of reason that neglects the primacy of intellectus over ratio; and (3) that he leaves philosophy and theology ultimately too extrinsic to each other. We will also try to show that these three shortcomings are all logically connected.

1

Let us begin with the first charge. To put it in a nutshell, our claim is that an *exclusively* “a posteriori” approach to knowledge of God renders God a finite object to the extent that he is intelligible at all—a reduction that cannot be remedied by an insistence on the ultimate apophaticism of natural theology, as we shall see in a moment. There are two aspects to this problem. The first is that exclusively a posteriori reasoning makes the intelligibility of God unilaterally dependent on the intelligibility of the things we experience and reflect on in the world. Fr. White affirms that our knowledge of “the existence of God . . . is derived from creatures” (271). How strictly does he mean that what we know of God is *derivative*? Is God’s intelligibility less than and subordinate to the intelligibility of creatures? An appeal to the quoad nos—in se distinction does not suffice to avoid the disorder that this implication represents. Fr. White anticipates this potential problem by insisting on the *analogical* character of our knowledge of God, which comes about through the classical threefold method of naming God that Fr. White elaborates in the book’s final chapter: one posits a (finite) notion, negates whatever imperfection lies within it, and then attributes the thus purified notion in a “super-eminent” sense to God (268–74). The point of this method is precisely to avoid attributing something to God in a merely finite sense; the negation in the second moment allows the notion to stand for *more* in relation to God than it does when ascribed to creatures. But the danger is that, if the difference between God and the world is conceived in an exclusively negative manner—which is to say that if one moves from the finite to the infinite only by removing something, as it were (namely, what is taken to be an imperfection)—then anything positive in one’s resultant knowledge of God remains altogether finite.²³ In this case, the “super-eminent” name

²³ Along similar lines, but in a different context, Balthasar signals the danger in the philosophy of religion of “constructing” an idea of God by combining finite notions, in this case simply identifying the non-subsistence of esse with essence as we understand it, to achieve a concept of *Ipsium Esse subsistens*: “Thinking about the two finitudes together (even the nonsubsistence of the real points to such a finitude) does not result in the absolute.” *Epilogue*, trans. Edward T. Oakes, S.J. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 49. If we acknowledge that the notion of the infinite achieved by simply negating the finite is a finite notion of the infinite, we

of God would essentially be a “super-sized” finite intelligibility, alongside of which one would append an indeterminate openness to the infinity of God, which is void of content precisely because it is based simply on a negation. The “more” of God’s intelligibility in this approach lies therefore precisely *outside* of our thinking, rather than also in some (yet to be determined) sense “inside” of it. The significance of this crucial point will become more evident as we proceed.

The only way to avoid simply juxtaposing the excess to the determinate concept is to acknowledge that the infinity of God bears in some sense positively on our understanding in the finite order. What could this mean? Here we come to the second aspect. To think of God as something we attain only at the end of our reasoning, that is, in an exclusively a posteriori manner, assumes that God lies, so to speak, “out *there*,” and *not* in any sense “in *here*” and always already present in our thinking, or to put it in more technical language, that it is possible to affirm God’s transcendence without necessarily and as a function thereof also affirming God’s immanence. It is precisely in this respect that Fr. White’s facile dismissal of Plato, and by extension the broad Christian tradition inspired by him, comes back to haunt him. Fr. White insists on the priority of a causal analysis of being in the development of a natural theology, and claims that a proper (natural) understanding of God emerges in our consideration of the extrinsic causes of being. Perhaps as a result of the importance Fr. White gives to Aristotle, he describes God almost exclusively in terms of final causality, and so in terms, not of being’s first act (its internal cause, namely, its substance), but of being’s second act, the operation by which being achieves its perfection. There is virtually no discussion, here, of God as creator, specifically as the *first* cause of the creative act that is in some respect prior even to substance. The danger here, of course, is that God thereby threatens to become a being that does not concern things in any sense as they are in themselves, but only that to which they subsequently relate. But, as the Platonic tradition strives always to recollect, as it were, if God is the transcendent cause of reality, then the meaning of God does not simply emerge *after* we get clear about the meaning of the world and so wholly on the basis of that meaning, but rather precisely because it is the meaning *of God* we must come to see that this meaning was always already operating in a manner that we can only ever be insufficiently aware of at any point over the course of our thinking. In other words, reason cannot attain to God exclusively in an a posteriori manner, but God must always also be “a priori” *in some respect* precisely insofar as he is the transcendent cause of all reality. This

ought to heed the same warning in applying the divine names according to the method Fr. White elaborates.

means that we cannot move, as it were, from *A* to *B* to *C* and then to God, but the attainment of God in our thinking necessarily requires us to go back to *A*, *B*, and *C* all over again and rethink their thus-transformed significance. This is what it would mean to say that the infinity of God bears *positively* on our notions, and is not something simply negatively derived therefrom. We will return to this point in a moment when we consider Fr. White's conception of reason.

One of the reasons Fr. White insists on excluding any "aprioristic" approaches to God is the very good one that it compromises God's transcendence. If Aquinas acknowledges some "presentiment of God," he explains, it has nothing to do with any "innate ideas" but is rather a desire for our perfection that is by implication a desire for God.²⁴ The rejection of Cartesian "innate ideas," however, and the compromise of God's transcendence that they certainly do represent, need not lead to a rejection of any and all traces of the "a priori," beyond a very general desire for perfection, in reason's relation to God. One might say that the false dilemma that Fr. White presents himself—*either* a priori *or* a posteriori—is the price he pays for his facile dismissal of Plato. For a further alternative, beyond the two Fr. White allows, we might consider St. Augustine's reflections on the mind's relationship to God in the *Confessions*, above all in book X. Here, St. Augustine asks "where" and "when" it is he first encounters God, and passes from the "external" world of the senses to the "internal" world of the soul,²⁵ getting closer as it were with each step, until he reaches the innermost region of the mind from which all of its powers spring, the region he calls *memory*. While one expects him to come upon God once this final door, so to speak, is opened, Augustine instead encounters a difficulty: to have a memory presupposes that one already has knowledge, that the encounter has already at some point taken place, which would mean that he had not yet in fact found the origin of that encounter. Affirming

²⁴ *Wisdom*, 247. Although speaking of a "presentiment of God," Fr. White indicates only one aspect of what Aquinas says regarding the appetitive order, and does not consider what he says regarding the understanding specifically. Aquinas insists in fact that God is implicit in our will, not only as final cause but also as efficient cause, and in our intellect as exemplar cause: "All things naturally tend to God, but not explicitly. . . . Accordingly, because God is the last end, He is sought in every end, just as, because He is the first efficient cause, He acts in every agent," *De veritate*, q. 22, a. 2; "All cognitive beings also know God implicitly in any object of knowledge. Just as nothing has the note of appetibility except by a likeness to the first goodness, so nothing is knowable except by a likeness to the first truth." *De veritate*, q. 22, a. 2, ad 1. The word "likeness" indicates the order of form.

²⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), X. 6–8.

God as already part of one's memory—as an “innate idea,” one might say—would compromise God's transcendence, and ultimately eliminate the gratuity of the encounter with grace. On the other hand, however, Augustine points out that one could not *seek* God, and indeed could not recognize God if one in fact were to find him, unless one *did* already have a memory of God.²⁶ This is, of course, a variation of “Meno's paradox,” which Plato discusses in the dialogue of that name.²⁷

Augustine solves the problem without short-circuiting the complexity through some reduction, and ends up describing the reality of the mind's relation to God in extremely paradoxical terms: to put it succinctly, God lies indeed beyond the mind, and so beyond the memory, but not in the sense that God comes simply after the mind, as something it subsequently discovers simply outside of itself. Instead, God comes before the mind; he is, so to speak, *earlier than the mind's memory*. Thus, after noting God's presence in his memory,²⁸ Augustine reflects: “Where, then, did I find you so that I could learn of you? For you were not in my memory before I learned of you. Where else, then, did I find you, to learn of you, *unless it was in yourself, above me?*”²⁹ So, Augustine, here, reverses the perspective, as it were, and so discovers his mind in God rather than discovering God “in” his mind as an innate idea. This leads to the temporal paradox we have indicated, which he ascribes to God specifically as Beauty—“I have learnt to love you late, Beauty, at once so ancient and so new! I have learnt to love you late”—and provokes the realization: “You were with me, but I was not with you.”³⁰ This, one could say, is the epistemological implication of the ontological truth Augustine affirms, namely, that God is “interior intimo meo et superior summo meo.”³¹ It

²⁶ “So I must go beyond memory too, if I am to reach the God who made me different from the beasts that walk on the earth and wiser than the birds that fly in the air. I must pass beyond memory to find you, my true Good, my sure Sweetness. But where will the search lead me? Where am I to find you? If I find you beyond my memory, it means that I have no memory of you. How, then, am I to find you, if I have no memory of you?” *Confessions* X. 17.

²⁷ Plato, *Meno*, 80e. Plato solves the paradox through what he presents as a myth of recollection, according to which the soul already knows what it “learns” in time. The fact that it is presented as a myth, and has obvious logistical problems, indicates that Plato does not mean it in the “literalistic” sense it is often presumed to have. In any event, Augustine's problem is even more difficult, since it involves a truth above the soul rather than one that is ultimately identical to it, as Plato appears to believe that the truth of the forms is.

²⁸ *Confessions*, X. 24–25.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, X. 26. Emphasis added.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, X. 27.

³¹ *Ibid.*, III. 6.

serves to show that the issue of ontotheology cannot be decided by methodology alone, since the *nature* of the object reason discovers has, we might say, retroactive implications for reason's approach.

Our understanding of God is, for Augustine, neither merely a posteriori nor merely a priori, but is in fact both at once, because God could not genuinely transcend the mind without also being at the same time already present within it. We genuinely discover God as a truth that we did not know before, but we discover him precisely as preceding and enabling our search, as already having been present in and guiding it all along the way. To reject this "a priori" dimension and insist that our knowledge of God is not presupposed in any sense by our inquiry but results simply from the purely natural efforts of reason is what we might call "epistemological semipelagianism."³² The affirmation that our knowledge of God is a priori *because* it is a posteriori, to say it again, is nothing more than the epistemological expression of the ontological truth that God is immanent in all things precisely *because* he transcends them all, so that to deny his immanence is to deny his transcendence.³³ This paradox is summed up perhaps most succinctly in Nicolas of Cusa's famous formulation: God is so other, he is the *not other*, the "*non aliud*."³⁴ The Christian tradition took over and deepened this originally Platonic insight into the mind's relation to the first cause for what is no doubt the best possible reason: because it is undeniably true.

Now, to be sure, it was not Augustine's aim, in book X of the *Confessions*, to present an argument for the existence of God. Instead, he was simply reflecting in these passages on the mind's relation to God within the context of an already-established faith. It would be important to explore in detail what the truth of the paradox would imply for such arguments, which we cannot do in the present context except to make a very general observation.³⁵ At the very least, one would have to say that the simple a

³² Whereas Pelagianism concerned a particular interpretation of Adam and the effects of original sin, "semipelagianism," which was defined as a heresy at the Second Council of Orange in 529, consists of the claim that we can preserve the freedom of the act of faith only if we conceive it as initiated by an act of the natural will alone, without the aid of grace, even if we allow grace to give subsequent aid and bring the act of will to its fruition.

³³ More specifically, to reject God's immanence is to put God's being in competition with the world's being (where the world is, God is not, and vice versa), which is to reduce God and the world to beings of the same order, and thus to deny God's transcendence of that order.

³⁴ Nicholas of Cusa, *De Li Non Aliud* (*On God As Not-Other*).

³⁵ This is essentially what de Lubac does in *The Discovery of God*, especially chapter 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 57–86.

priori (so to speak) rejection in principle of all a priori arguments for the existence of God is suspicious—as would be any claim that only a priori arguments are legitimate. There would have to be room for both, with a priority given to a posteriori arguments insofar as God's immanence is a function of his transcendence rather than the reverse. In this respect, we would have to reflect on why Fr. White, who otherwise champions Aquinas's natural theology, would believe it necessary to reject Aquinas's "fourth way" to God, which he deems to be itself "aprioristic" as Aquinas presents it, and which he therefore insists must be reread as founded on one of the other, more evidently "a posteriori," arguments (168).

2

The paradox of the mind's approach to God, in which it discovers "a posteriori" that God has preceded it, leads us to examine, not just reason's initial principles, but more fundamentally the nature and operation of reason itself. If Augustine's description of the mind's relation to God is a good one, it is clearly insufficient to think of reason as following a simple progressive path from its self-evidential starting points, through an analysis of its experience, all the way up to God. The point is not to reject this path, but to refuse to isolate it as the whole of reason's journey. Although it is certainly true that reason moves in a progressive way, if we absolutize this aspect, we will end up with what we might call an essentially "centrifugal" notion of reason, a view of reason as "fleeing its origins." If, by contrast, it is indeed the case that the ultimate cause that reason seeks, adequately conceived, lies just as much at the origin as at the end, then on the one hand we will have to elevate the significance of reason's "downward" or "reverse" path, by which it judges and so reconsiders its starting premises in the light of its later insights, and, on the other hand, we will have to enrich our sense of the intelligibility of the *given*, of what therefore precedes and enables the subsequent work that reason carries out in its achievement of knowledge. We will see how both of these dimensions come into play in aspects of Fr. White's criticisms of Maritain and Gilson.

Let us recall, first of all, that Fr. White's case for natural theology centers on what he calls the "*via inventionis*," the "path of discovery," which he follows St. Thomas in distinguishing from the "*via iudicii*," the "path of judgment": "Aquinas himself distinguishes between a philosophical *via inventionis*, or way of inquiry, by which the intellect proceeds from initial, self-evident principles to scientific conclusions, and the *via iudicii*, by which the intellect judges in the light of its more ultimate discoveries the initial principles from which it began" (xxix). Although he mentions at one point that both dimensions are part of philosophical

reflection in Aquinas's conception of the matter,³⁶ he also admits that he focuses almost exclusively on the *via inventionis*. In fact, he tends to identify the path of discovery with philosophy simply.³⁷ It ought to be clear how the identification of philosophy with this path fits in with Fr. White's interpretation of the problem of ontotheology: Fr. White wishes to show that reason does not ("aprioristically") *assume* God at the outset, but must make its own way on the basis of ordinary experience to come to an (always analogical) understanding of God. It is precisely *because* the insights acquired, the discoveries made, are due to reason's own efforts, for Fr. White, that we can call them genuinely philosophical. What was already disclosed to reason, before its labors, is therefore precisely not philosophical.

This assumption regarding the nature and operation of reason becomes apparent in Fr. White's criticism of Maritain: the French Thomist, he explains, misunderstands the place of the transcendentals in Aquinas's thought, and is thereby led to a form of ontotheology in his natural theology. Maritain believes that metaphysics begins with what he calls an "intuition of being," an intuition that includes the fundamental properties of being—unity, truth, goodness, and beauty.³⁸ Given the "quasi-immediate" intuition of being,³⁹ and the "resolutio" of this intuition into the transcendental properties, one is able to move directly to a demonstration of the existence of God by way of the analogy of proper proportionality. For Maritain, the transcendentals thus form part of the *subject* of metaphysics, and it is essentially on their basis that we proceed to natural knowledge of God (147). According to Fr. White, because Maritain bypasses a causal analysis of the beings in ordinary experience, he thinks of the mind's journey to God

³⁶ See *Wisdom*, 250. Although he refers to "philosophical thought" here, Fr. White clarifies elsewhere that Aquinas himself did not seek to distill a philosophical discourse about God for believers that is relatively autonomous with respect to a specifically theological discourse. Nevertheless, Fr. White's argument is that such a distillation can be carried out on principles that Aquinas articulates—which means that the distinction between philosophy and theology is not foreign to his thought, even if it is one that he does not himself make explicitly.

³⁷ See, e.g., *Wisdom*, 68 and 73.

³⁸ See *Wisdom*, 139. Jacques Maritain considered beauty a transcendental property, whereas Fr. White does not. In this, he appears to follow Jan Aertsen, according to whom beauty does not add anything that is not already present in goodness precisely as following upon truth in the proper order of the transcendentals. This position is consistent with the "linear" interpretation of reason that we are suggesting Fr. White is advocating in the present book.

³⁹ The reason it is not simply immediate is that Maritain affirms that this intuition is not innate but is achieved through the judgment of existence, and so is preceded by that judgment (see *Wisdom*, 139).

as consisting of an unpacking, so to speak, of the original intuition of being in which God is implicitly contained, and so overlooks the role of the *ad alterum* analogy, which Aquinas thinks is necessary for protecting God's transcendence.

Setting aside the question of the accuracy of Fr. White's characterization of Maritain, let us consider his assessment from the perspective of what it reveals about his own suppositions regarding the operation of reason. Fr. White affirms, with Maritain, that "resolutio" is an essential part of metaphysics, but he argues that Maritain misunderstands what this term designates in Aquinas. Fr. White makes two judgments in this regard that are decisive with respect to the question of the nature of reason. First, Fr. White explains that "resolutio" is not principally an intuitive act for Aquinas, but is instead essentially reflexive—that is, we are not simply given the simple notions that lie at the foundation of metaphysics, but instead we arrive at them through a process of *reasoning* (143–44). This process, moreover, takes two forms in Aquinas, namely, a "forward-moving" or "scientific" form, by which reason proceeds from experience to first principles, which allows demonstration, and a "backward-moving" form in which reason analyzes the various definitions it assumes of things, reducing them to their most basic notions (144). According to Fr. White, the transcendentals do not arise through the former of these forms of *resolutio*, as Maritain seems to think, but through the latter. This leads to the second judgment Fr. White makes: This latter form of *resolutio* is *epistemological*, he says, *rather than ontological*; it concerns our most basic *notions* rather than causes of being. In fact, he goes on to identify the transcendental properties as in this respect similar to the principles of identity and non-contradiction, laws that regulate our thinking rather than aspects of being (144–45)—an astonishingly Kantian position for one who claims to be responding to modern thought with a classical wisdom. This interpretation entails Fr. White's judgment that the transcendentals do not represent the subject of metaphysics for Aquinas, a role reserved for the basic parts of causal analysis, namely, substance and accidents, act and potency. The study of these causes, according to Fr. White, involves, indeed, the "resolutio" that founds genuine metaphysical inquiry, but in this case it is specifically the "forward-moving" (that is, a *posteriori*) form of *resolutio*, which Fr. White connects with the *via inventionis*.⁴⁰ In a word, metaphysics is identified with the path of discovery,

⁴⁰ See *Wisdom*, 144: "[T]he latter form of *resolutio*, meanwhile, 'goes backward' from basic experience to see what were the initial starting-points of human knowledge. It is an epistemological study, meant to discern the underlying archeology of all rational reflection, the most basic concepts from which all laws of thought are derived. The discovery of the transcendentals as the genetically primary notions

which is in turn identified with the particular work, the reflexive activity, of reasoning as opposed to the intuitive act of understanding or insight.

The classical tradition generally draws a distinction, in our knowing, between the intuitive moment (*intellectus*), by which the mind directly apprehends its object or perceives its self-evident first principles, and the discursive moment (*ratio*), by which the mind makes inferences, reasoning from principles to conclusions. According to Aquinas, these are not two separate acts, but rather two distinct aspects of the same act, just as the principle of movement and rest are one and the same. Ratio relates to intellectus, then, as movement to rest.⁴¹ Fr. White's assessment of Maritain, as we have sketched it here, reveals that he tends to reduce philosophy to ratio. That he generally *excludes* intellectus from what counts as reason in the proper philosophical sense is revealed in the fact that he regularly refers to the "intellective" moment of thought as "fore-theoretical."⁴² His distance from the classical tradition becomes unmistakable here: the word "theoretical" comes from θεωρία, meaning, above all, "contemplation," which is principally an act of νόησις or intellection rather than διάνοια or ratiocination. For Aquinas, as for the classical tradition more broadly, intellection is the more perfect act; ratiocination exists as subordinate to and for the sake of intellection, just as movement is for the sake of rest. Intellectus is not simply a spring board for reason, but governs reasoning as both its origin and end. Thus, in calling the intellectus dimension of reason "pre-theoretical," Fr. White has it exactly backwards: the *via inventionis* he elevates and in a certain sense isolates as the essence of reason is in fact "post-theoretical," or perhaps in another respect it is itself "pre-theoretical" insofar as it aims to make genuine insight possible. It is in either case an *instrument* of the more fundamentally receptive act that characterizes genuine "theory." If Josef Pieper is right that the eclipse of intellectus by ratio is one of the defining marks of the modern form of thought,⁴³ then in this respect Fr. White's conception of reason bears a strong resemblance to that of the very modernity in the face of which he intends to throw ancient wisdom.

common to all acts of understanding comes about, for Aquinas, through this latter form of study. We can deduce, upon rational reflection, that there are certain starting points to our thinking, that were always, already there, even if we were not reflexively aware of them. Here we discover the primary notions that are the basis for such axioms as the law of non-contradiction and the principle of identity."

⁴¹ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 79, a. 8.

⁴² E.g., *Wisdom*, 134, 205, 210–11, 246, and so forth.

⁴³ Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, trans. Gerald Malsbary (South Bend, IN: Saint Augustine's Press, 1998), 9–14.

What are the implications of reducing the operation of the intellect to ratio, that is, reducing reason to the work of reasoning? We get an overshadowing of the two dimensions that, as we noted above, are essential for reason in relation to God. On the one hand, one would be inclined to minimize the significance of the *given* that precedes one's reasoning, and on the other hand one would tend to neglect the "downward path" of reason, the "via iudicii," by which reason judges its starting points (that which is first quoad nos) in the light of its ultimate discoveries (that which is first per se). We will consider Fr. White's minimizing of the "given" in just a moment. As for the second point, we have already observed that Fr. White admits it does not play a significant role in his argument (250). Why would it not? There is a curious similarity between reason's path of judgment, as Fr. White describes it, and the role that Aquinas ascribes to faith in its distinction from what he calls the philosopher's use of natural reason in the *Summa contra Gentiles*: in natural reason, we begin with creatures and end with God, while for faith God comes first and we consider creatures in the light of God, who represents their first principle.⁴⁴ Now, an interesting dilemma arises here for one who thinks of reason primarily in terms of its discursive work of demonstration. If it is the case that what we know of the first principle is simply what we have inferentially derived from creatures (as we described above according to Fr. White's "path of discovery"), then there is nothing to be gained by this "return trip" from God to creatures, and there is everything to be lost: for I am either simply acknowledging what it was I took for granted at the outset, or, if I purport to offer a *demonstration* of some aspect of the creatures on the basis of the conclusions I reached regarding the first principle for which they functioned as premises, then I am trapping myself in a vicious circle that would seem to undermine the philosophical legitimacy of what I had thought I had initially demonstrated.

Things appear differently from the perspective of the more ample notion of reason that we are advocating. If one grasps the super-abundant intelligibility of what precedes our reasoning, one can see that the work of ratio would bring to light more than one explicitly understood at the outset of the very principle that enables one's work. In this case, judging one's starting points in the light of one's discoveries would represent a genuine gain. At the same time, and for the same reason, however, it also introduces another paradox, because the development of our insight into our starting points implies, in turn, that we need to re-think our discoveries. And then of course this leads us to the necessity of a new judgment

⁴⁴ ScG II, ch. 4.

of our starting points. Instead of a simple linear progression, then, by which thought establishes “A” in a definitive way, then proceeds on its basis to an equally definitive “B,” and so on up the line—an itinerary Fr. White traces out in distinct stages in the penultimate chapter of his book—what we have here is rather a never-ending circle, whereby our most ultimate discoveries and our most basic starting assumptions reciprocally illuminate each other, and through this simultaneous ascent and descent reason penetrates ever more profoundly into its object.

With this paradoxically progressing circling in mind, let us return to Fr. White’s judgment of Maritain. Fr. White contends that the mind “resolves” its matter in two different directions: the first is epistemological; it is a movement ever more deeply into the mind, as it were, by which reason comes to see what was always already intuitively grasped (*intellectus*) and thereby presupposed in its thinking. It is here that the transcendentals reveal themselves. The second movement is ontological; it is a movement ever more deeply into being, as it were, by which reason comes to grasp the essential causes of things through analysis (*ratio*). This is metaphysics proper. According to Fr. White, Maritain confuses these two movements by making the transcendentals the subject of metaphysics. Note that Fr. White is taking for granted, here, the very modern assumption that because the transcendentals are presupposed a priori in all of our thinking, therefore they are epistemological—that is, just “notions” or “definitions”—rather than ontological. An alternative approach would be to take them as presupposed in all of our causal analyses, but not simply as a springboard necessary to get our thinking started, a non-ontological tool that subsequently enables our inquiry into the being that lies “out there” beyond the mind. Rather, in line with Aquinas’s description of the relation between intellectus and ratio, as the most basic features of the being that is the first notion to enter the mind, they stand among the first principles that form the bases of our discoveries, but then in turn they cast a light for the judgment of what we have discovered. More specifically, we presuppose a grasp of the good, the one, and the true, but flesh out their intelligible content through a causal analysis of substance, accidents, act, and potency, and then in turn judge the meaning of these on the basis of the transcendentals. We need to understand actuality in order to know what goodness is, but we also need to know what goodness is to understand actuality properly. Once again, what comes to light a posteriori illuminates what was already present a priori.

We noted above that a reduction of reason to ratio leads one to minimize the significance of the *given* in one’s view of reason. We can see how this occurs by considering Fr. White’s assessment of Gilson, which will

lead us then to the final theme regarding the implications of all of this for the relationship between philosophy and theology. As Fr. White explains it, Gilson's great insight into the uniqueness, the perfection, of *esse*, which Gilson takes to be Aquinas's principal contribution to philosophy, was at the same time the cause of an intellectual crisis: the notion is so fundamental it seems to be indemonstrable, and so faced with the question of whence reason obtains such a notion, Gilson was forced by his presuppositions ultimately to appeal to revelation (104). But this, Fr. White judges, is fideism, insofar as it makes revelation the foundation of philosophical reflection, and substitutes grace for the work of natural reason. Against Gilson's reading of Aquinas, Fr. White argues that the real distinction between *esse* and essence can be developed organically through an analysis of the internal and external causes of being, which means that, even if Aristotle did not affirm the real distinction in Aquinas's sense, we can nevertheless draw it out of notions he *does* affirm (104). If we succeed in doing so, it shows that there is no need to turn to revelation to come to an understanding of God as transcendent cause of the world in order to understand the being that forms the subject of metaphysics.

Now, the key text that Fr. White cites from Gilson as the basis for his charge of fideism is a passage from *Elements of Christian Philosophy* in which Gilson asks whence Aquinas obtained his "new notion" of *esse*, and replies: "[He] may well have first conceived the notion of an act of being [*esse*] in connection with God and then starting from God, made use of it in his analysis of the metaphysical structure of composite substances."⁴⁵ After pointing out that Aquinas himself explains that Moses himself learned "the sublime truth" that God is his own existence, Gilson observes: "This invites us to admit that, according to Thomas himself, the notion of *esse* can be learned from the very words of God."⁴⁶ Fr. White infers, then, from these very words of Gilson: "The intelligence, instructed by revelation, achieves a correct *philosophical* outlook upon reality. The nature of the intelligence is thus restored by grace to its original metaphysical capacities," and then offers what he takes to be a summary statement of Gilson's position: "henceforth it must be admitted that a realistic metaphysical knowledge of being and of God is possible for the human person only in cooperation with revelation. True philosophy must be conducted under the illuminating influence of Christian faith" (118). What a remarkable inference! Gilson states that *it is possible* for reason to achieve a philosophical insight in the

⁴⁵ Gilson, *Elements of Christian Philosophy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960), 131–32; cited in *Wisdom*, 117.

⁴⁶ Gilson, cited in *Wisdom*, 118.

light of faith, and Fr. White hears him saying that metaphysics has no beginning other than the Nicene Creed.

The point in drawing attention to this straw man is, once again, not primarily to dispute Fr. White's interpretation of Gilson, but to think through the implications more generally of the position he takes with respect to Gilson. Gilson does not think that the possibility that reason may achieve a philosophical insight within the mind's illumination by faith entails a compromise of reason's integrity. It is interesting to note that, as Fr. White admits in a footnote, Gilson does not in fact deny that one can discern the real distinction "through general philosophical analysis of beings we experience."⁴⁷ Fr. White takes Gilson's later statement here to be a kind of confusion regarding the origin of this notion, but the more evident interpretation is that Gilson does not see faith and reason as opposed, in the sense that, if faith is at all operative in one's thinking, then reason precisely to that extent is not. It is worth noting that this is the very same opposition that semipelagianism takes for granted with respect to the order of the will. For Gilson, the possibility that faith might enable philosophical reason to attain *its own* insight does not exclude the possibility that reason may come to this insight by other means (for example, through demonstration). Fr. White's assessment of Gilson reveals, by contrast, that he takes these to be necessarily exclusive, which means that, for him, faith and reason are opposed to each other in principle—though this does not mean that they will be opposed *de facto*. As we will see in a moment, Fr. White avoids opposing faith and reason simply by separating their spheres of sovereignty, so to speak, and believes that an insistence on the necessity of each in their separate spheres suffices as an affirmation of their integration.

The key to the difference between Gilson and Fr. White has to do with the rational significance of the *given*. As we suggested above, reason, for Fr. White, can claim for itself *only* those notions it has worked out on

⁴⁷ See *Wisdom*, 119fn31. Fr. White cites what he calls, with Ralph McNerny, a "logical contradiction" in Gilson, who seems, on the one hand, to make the real distinction something established only at the end of metaphysical reflection and, on the other hand, to posit it at the same time as the "initial proper object" of Aquinas's metaphysics. In fact, however, Gilson interprets Aquinas as affirming "being qua being" as the initial proper object of metaphysics, the "*first sense*" of which is substance (see Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 2nd ed. [Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952], 157 [emphasis added]), even if this does not remain its *only* sense. Rather, Aquinas deepens this notion in part in the light of creation and revelation. In this, we have an example of that which is first being "retroactively" transformed by what follows. There is contradiction here only if one reduces reason to a unilateral, linear discursus.

its own. This is what we have referred to as “epistemological semipelagianism.” For Gilson, by contrast, what is given to reason—and to that extent from “outside” of reason’s deliberate acts—may nevertheless belong to reason as its own. We can thus speak of a reciprocal illumination between the *a priori* and *a posteriori*: while it is true, as Fr. White argues, that a causal analysis of being can make the notion of *esse* (and its real distinction from essence) intelligible, giving it a certain concrete content through the interplay of different sorts of analogies, it is also true that the perfection of *esse* can never simply be derived from such an analysis; the meaning of *ipsum esse* has a wholeness, a “once-and-for-all-ness,” that cannot be pieced together from any number of conceptual parts—substance, accidents, act, and potency. Indeed, it reveals the proper meaning of the very parts from which it would be derived, which means that they depend on it even more than it depends on them. This is behind Gilson’s insistence that Aquinas takes over intact Aristotle’s notion of being, and at the same time radically transforms its meaning in the light of the notion of creation.⁴⁸ Reason moves simultaneously from above and from below, but no matter which way reason initially proceeds, the former has an absolute priority over the latter. To affirm this is simply to unfold the implications of affirming the primacy of intellectus over ratio.

3

Finally, a reductive concept of reason, such as we have been describing, leads of necessity to an extrinsicist understanding of the relationship between faith and reason, theology and philosophy, no matter how much one insists on their close cooperation. Let us recall the indispensable point Fr. White insists on in this book, namely, that unless reason is capable of attaining knowledge of God, the revelation of faith will remain a foreign imposition, reason will not be *intrinsically* open to faith. These affirmations imply a unity coincident with an irreducible difference, and

⁴⁸ Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 160: “The Aristotelian substance remains intact in the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas. Yet, the Aristotelian substance cannot enter the world of St. Thomas Aquinas without at the same time entering a Christian world; and this means that it will have to undergo many inner transformations in order to become a created substance.” Fr. White also admits that Aquinas transforms Aristotle, but he gives little indication of what this means other than adding new notions such as the *ad alterum* analogy or extending Aristotle’s concepts into new areas: see *Wisdom*, 67. He is explicit that the light of faith cannot effect the sort of “inner transformations” that Gilson describes: see, for example, *Wisdom*, xxvfn9, in which he says that faith can purify one’s capacity to exercise natural knowledge but that it does not bear in any way on the “structure,” that is, on the inner content, of that knowledge.

moreover indicate an internal connection rather than an external one. As we put it at the very outset of this essay, faith has room for natural reason *inside* of itself, and we may add now that the movement toward faith must originate from within reason rather than arise after reason has, so to speak, come to a stop.

Given these parameters, let us consider Fr. White's formulation of the relationship that he offers at the end of his book. As we noted at the outset, Fr. White explains the mutual cooperation without interference between faith and reason by saying that philosophy proves *that* God exists, while theology interprets the revelation of *who and what* God is. This would seem to harmonize faith and reason by ascribing to each a distinct responsibility in our coming to understand God. But in fact the moment we press below the surface of this formulation, the matter becomes much more complex: does natural reason tell us *nothing at all* about the essence of God? In his criticism of Denys Turner, Fr. White argues that metaphysics does offer positive, substantial (though of course analogical) knowledge of God's nature.⁴⁹ In this case, philosophy does not simply prove that God exists but reveals in its own way something of what God is.

To the extent that this is true, we next have to ask: what is the relationship between this natural knowledge, which reason works out on its own, and the knowledge that is given in faith? Does revelation simply *add* something to what reason already knows of God in philosophy, so that this natural knowledge remains unchanged in the light of faith? There is a dilemma here. If we say that philosophy yields *some truth* about the nature of God in complete independence of faith, a truth that remains in every respect the same even once it is affirmed again by a believer, it means that what is revealed in faith has no bearing whatsoever on that particular philosophical truth. Now, Fr. White made the important point that we cannot construct a natural theology independently of faith as a

⁴⁹ There is a curious shift in emphasis in the book: in the early chapters, Fr. White insists that philosophy yields no knowledge at all of God's essence (see, for example, 97: "The discovery of God's causality of existence in creatures permits an analogical attribution of perfections to God *ad alterum*, which implies no apprehension of God's essence or nature"), but argues in the final chapter that there is some positive knowledge ("our naming of God signifies truly *what God is substantially in himself*," 272). These two statements do not necessarily contradict each other; indeed, in the latter text Fr. White explicitly states that this does not entail any "quidditative knowledge." But it would seem to be more in line with the text that he cites from Aquinas (*ST* I, q. 13, a. 2) to say that the knowledge gained "falls short of full representation" rather than to deny that it is quidditative. What, after all, could absolutely non-quidditative knowledge be?

standard by which the contents of faith are subsequently measured (xxiv). But it seems that he cannot avoid doing just this, given his construal of the nature of philosophical reason. Faced with this problem, Fr. White follows what would seem to be the obvious “escape hatch”: one says that natural theology, properly understood, not only obtains certain insights into the nature of God, but at the very same time recognizes its inadequacy, and this, then, opens reason up in a positive way to revelation (274). But this is no escape hatch! In fact, it only leads one deeper into the hole. For if one continues to maintain that what reason, even in its “radical imperfection” (254), comes to know of God *is* carried over into faith without any transformation, then one is in fact saying not only that faith is measured unilaterally with respect to these particular truths by reason, but now in addition that it is measured by a reason that is self-professedly inadequate! Here we have a prime example of the problem of reason simultaneously claiming both too much and too little.

It does not do, at this point, to surrender all “positive” yield in philosophy, that is, to become excessively apophatic in one’s philosophizing and say that natural theology tells us only the sheer fact that God *is*, which is separate from all of the theological insight into what or who God is, for at least two reasons: this formulation would compromise divine simplicity, and it would leave reason and faith altogether external to one another, so that reason is structurally indifferent to God’s essence, and faith has no bearing on what it means to say that God exists. Nor can we content ourselves by saying philosophy tells us only what God *is not*, for, unless we revisit the basic presupposition we have been discussing, this denial trumps any positive disclosure of faith *precisely insofar as reason is concerned*. The whole content of theological dogma would in this case become sheer fideistic positivism. We cannot simply separate into two packages our natural theology and our sacred theology, even if we subsequently tie the two together. As Fr. White correctly affirms, there is “significant overlap” in fact between the two realms (255). But in this case, which has ultimate jurisdiction, so to speak, over this common area? We must be able to articulate the relationship between the two in such a way that we compromise neither the integrity of reason nor the ultimate authority of faith.

My proposal here is that this can be done only by affirming the paradox of the a priority of the a posteriori, which we described earlier in the workings of reason. Let us take an example. Following the itinerary Fr. White describes in chapter 7, through an analysis of the internal and external causes of being, reason discerns the real distinction between *esse* and *essence* in creatures and thereby comes to affirm the non-composition of God’s being. In other words, reason, through its own reflections, achieves

an insight into divine simplicity: God is absolutely one. As it turns out (!), this is also what theology says about God, only theology says at the same time that God is a Trinity of Persons, each of whom is really (not merely conceptually) distinct from the others.⁵⁰ In other words, theology reveals that the affirmation of divine simplicity does not entail the denial of all *real distinction* in principle. Note, this revelation is not a rejection of natural theology, insofar as the dogmatic formulation of this mystery continues to affirm absolute simplicity, but at the same time the revelation implies a genuine transformation of the natural knowledge at issue here. We come to see that the affirmation of simplicity does not require the rejection of real distinction altogether, even if we would almost inevitably have assumed it did if we had never been enabled to rise above the insight into simplicity, so to speak, and consider it from a higher perspective. Once we do “rise above” it, however, we see that the notion acquires a new content, but that it does so without changing into some other notion. If one were, by contrast, to reject any transformation in principle, and insist that in all cases of an “overlap” between philosophy and theology, philosophy measures theology precisely as far as reason is concerned, one would have to say that the revelation of the Trinitarian nature of God is a pure datum of faith, that the real distinction among the Persons is strictly speaking irrelevant for how we interpret the meaning of divine simplicity, and, in short, that the Trinity is meaningless for us precisely as rational animals, that is, as human beings.⁵¹ The data of faith can be *meaningful* only if faith speaks *to* reason, rather than shouting over its head, as it were, and it can speak to reason only if it has something to say about the concepts reason rightfully takes to be its own. In other words, faith has to have rational implications, which means that it must have philosophical implications.

Following out this example further, we can see how the transformation we are describing gives more substance to reason’s desire for what lies

⁵⁰ Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 28, a. 3.

⁵¹ It is well known that Aquinas affirms the doctrine of the Trinity as lying above all reason, but the argument that he gives against Richard of St. Victor on this question is surely not his best: According to Aquinas, Richard of St. Victor’s argument that God is perfect charity, and that perfect charity requires plurality, does not work because sharing—that is, relation to an other—is not necessary if one has perfect goodness already in oneself (!). See *ST* I, q. 32, a. 1, ad 2. It would seem that one could protect what Aquinas wants to protect, without being forced to make such a problematic argument, by saying that the doctrine of the Trinity does indeed lie beyond reason, but it nevertheless speaks to reason in some respect, along the lines we have been tracing. Though Aquinas argues against a rational proof for the doctrine of the Trinity, he also insists that reasons can be given for its “fittingness” after the doctrine is known. In this case, the revelation does indeed speak to reason.

beyond itself. Although Fr. White affirms this crucial principle, he is led by his presuppositions to interpret it primarily in formal terms: "Because revelation is not derivable from metaphysical knowledge of God, it remains extrinsic to and transcendent of human nature. However, because it responds to the deepest human inclination toward truth, authentic revelation also fulfills gratuitously the deepest intrinsic teleological dimension of the human person" (255). Without further qualification, this may be interpreted as saying that the mind desires truth; the Christian God happens to be true; and so revelation fulfills this desire. It is similar, incidentally, to Fr. White's interpretation of Aquinas's affirmation that man implicitly knows God in all that he knows: we desire happiness; God turns out to be what ultimately makes us happy; and so we can in this way say that we have some "presentiment of God." But notice how question-begging both of these arguments are. How is it specifically God that satisfies our natural desire if it is not in fact a desire *for God*? How, with respect to the first argument, can the mind recognize the *truth* of God as the truth that it has been seeking? We face, here, the Meno problem once again, and the problem that Augustine wrestled with in book X of the *Confessions*, namely, that if we did not already have a memory of God, we would be unable to recognize him once we encountered him. Given a rationalistic reduction of reason, there is no answer to this problem; there is no way we could say that the revelation of the Trinity satisfies the mind's desire for truth. Indeed, revelation as such would be extraneous—just as it is, in the end, for Kant.⁵² The only intelligible content that could speak to the mind's desire would be the "monotheistic natural theology" that Fr. White repeatedly refers to in the book; in other words, if the essence of reason is a posteriori demonstration, as Fr. White suggests, it can be satisfied *qua* reason only by what it can demonstrate itself, and therefore by definition *without any need for revelation*. In this case, if it happens to accept revelation,

⁵² According to Kant, "Though it does indeed sound dangerous, it is in no way reprehensible to say that every man *creates a God* for himself, nay, must make himself such a God according to moral concepts . . . in order to honor in Him *the One who created him*. For in whatever manner a being has been made known to him by another and described as God, yea, even if such a being had appeared to him (if this is possible), he must first of all compare this representation with his ideal in order to judge whether he is entitled to regard it and to honor it as a divinity. Hence there can be no religion springing from revelation alone, that is, without *first* positing that concept, in its purity, as a touchstone. Without this all reverence for God would be *idolatry*." *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore Greene and Hoyt Hudson (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), 157n. This seems to be the only alternative to blind obedience to authority if one does not accept Augustine's position from *Confessions* X.

it can be of necessity only for extrinsic reasons—that is, for “reasons” that are strictly extra-rational.⁵³

The example we presented above offers an alternative approach to this problem. In determining the truth of divine simplicity, reason desires the *truth* of that truth, which means it desires the most complete disclosure of that truth. If the Trinity of Persons is irrelevant to the meaning of divine simplicity, reason has no intrinsic interest in it. But if this revelation *recasts* the meaning of simplicity by revealing a more profound content to it than was initially evident, reason will rejoice in the discovery precisely *as* reason: it will experience the disclosure as an unanticipated fulfillment, that is, as a genuine novelty (a posteriori) that is what it always wanted (a priori) without knowing it. But this has a further unexpected implication: by virtue of this ultimate discovery, reason now sees that plurality of a certain sort is not inimical to perfection, as it may initially have thought, to the extent that it was led to posit an identity of essence and existence in the first cause, and so reason discovers that it is true but inadequate to say that natural theology is essentially “monotheistic,” at least in the sense that would exclude in principle a plurality of divine Persons. But this means that its search for the first cause is not a search only for absolute simplicity, that is, the perfection of unity, but is also in some sense a search for the perfection of difference.⁵⁴ The question of what such a search would look like cannot be pursued here, but we may at least see that this complex path would represent a concrete example of the point we made above, namely, that reason is brought by its later insights to reconsider its original assumptions.

In his exposition of Aquinas’s natural theology in chapter 3, Fr. White explains that, for Aquinas, following Avicenna and contra Averroes, the proper subject of metaphysics is not separate substance (that is, God), but rather “common being” (78–79). God is not included within common being. But this does not mean that God is simply irrelevant to metaphysics; rather, according to Fr. White, God enters into this field of study precisely inasmuch as he is the cause of its subject. *Because* reason in its metaphysical dimension desires to understand being as being, it will seek knowledge of whatever bears on this understanding, preeminent among which is the cause of being. If we extend this line of reflection, we would have to say that

⁵³ This is not to say that we ought to accept faith only because of its rationality. Rather, faith is extra-rational, but not *only* extra-rational: properly understood, it also speaks *to* reason.

⁵⁴ We might consider here, for example, Richard of St. Victor’s reflection on the nature of God, as “that than which nothing greater can be thought,” in the light of the notions of goodness, glory, and charity.

reason, moreover, seeks to understand whatever bears on the nature of the cause of being, again, precisely insofar as it has being *qua* being as its subject. This leads to a question that cannot be dismissed: granted that revelation discloses to us something of the inner essence of God, which would otherwise be unavailable to reason in its own speculative reflections, does revelation bear on the meaning of God *precisely qua* the cause of being? Although it is customary to respond to this question that the Persons act as one *ad extra*, which then is typically taken to mean that such action can be understood simply “monotheistically” and therefore independently of any revelation,⁵⁵ Aquinas himself affirms that the revelation of the Trinity allows a proper understanding of creation inasmuch as it is precisely the processions of the Persons in God that present the “ratio creationis”⁵⁶—which cannot mean anything other than that the content of revelation illuminates the cause of being. To the extent that this is indeed the case, metaphysics cannot be said simply to exclude the revealed God from its purview.

The tricky question, of course, is the precise extent to which and the precise manner in which this is the case. A full discussion of the Trinity and creation, which a proper response to this question would require, is not possible here. But we may at least articulate a few general principles about the relationship between reason and revelation. First, if God as cause of being enters metaphysics only indirectly, we might say that revelation in turn bears only indirectly on God’s causing of being (which, we hasten to emphasize, does not in either case imply that God is only *accidentally* related to the subject matter). In other words, there would seem to be required here a further analogy, beyond even the *ad alterum* analogy that opens reason to God as transcendent cause, namely, something like an “analogy of faith,” which would reflect on the metaphysical significance of the revealed God.⁵⁷ This analogy would operate not primarily in an ascent, from creatures to

⁵⁵ In other words, the truth of the statement that God acts as one *ad extra* begs the further question whether faith transforms the content of the notion of oneness at issue.

⁵⁶ *ST I*, q. 32, a. 1, ad 3. Fr. White insists that Aquinas “understands the reason for creation *philosophically*” in the *ScG*, but then deepens this reason *theologically* in the *Summa theologiae*. The question of course is what sense does “deepen” have here: is it the addition of something simply new (which raises the question in turn of what significance this has with respect to what precedes it) or is it a fuller disclosure of philosophy’s own object? In this case, then, one could speak of faith deepening the specifically *philosophical* reflection in a way that remains distinct from theology in the strict sense.

⁵⁷ Here would be a point at which we could affirm Karl Barth’s notion of the *analogia fidei*, but we would do so in a certain sense against Barth: rather than posit it precisely *in the stead* of the metaphysical *analogia entis*, as Barth does, we are proposing it as inclusive of natural theology: not an “either-or” but a “both-and.”

God, as would the analogy *ad alterum*, but rather primarily in the manner of a descent, from God to creatures, because such a movement would preserve the quality of revelation by beginning specifically with God as *given*.⁵⁸ Second, for this very reason, we would be led to affirm both against ontotheology that metaphysics is *not necessarily theological*, that is, informed by revelation, but also against the *critique* of ontotheology that metaphysics is not necessarily not theological in this sense. In other words, while we avoid making God a logically necessary dimension of metaphysical thinking (by, for example, including him within the field of common being through an improper use of the *ad unum* analogy or the analogy of proper proportionality), we are not permitted positively to exclude the illumination of faith or to define metaphysics as non-theological (or more specifically: non-illuminated by faith) in principle and by definition.

This leads to two general principles regarding the relation between reason and revelation, the second more forceful than the first, which, in closing, we will consider with reference to concrete examples. We will also see how both have been embraced by the Church in the encyclical *Fides et Ratio*. The first is that theology may *gratuitously* inform philosophical thinking, which means that it offers something that is not strictly necessary for reason without being, for all that, irrelevant.⁵⁹ We saw this in Gilson's observation that Aquinas, who cites Moses as his authority with respect to his description of God as *ipsum esse*, "may very well" have come to see the significance of *esse* as a result of the illumination of revelation. Gilson insists that this nevertheless remains a philosophical insight—it is philosophical, we might observe, since it is after all an insight into the meaning of being qua being, which is the proper subject of metaphysics. Because Gilson makes a positive reference to revelation in philosophy, Fr. White accuses him of substituting grace for nature. But this would be the case only given the assumptions of what we have been calling "epistemological semipelagianism," which can affirm a natural act of reason only by denying that faith is operating in any intrinsic way in reason, and holding instead that it at best merely clears the ground, so to speak, so that reason can act on its own.⁶⁰ As Aquinas affirms, however,

⁵⁸ As Aquinas puts it in the *ScG* II, ch. 4, faith begins with the truth as God himself knows it (at least insofar as this is knowable to creatures), which is the truth of *God*, but also the truth of creatures *in God*.

⁵⁹ This formulation does not exclude the affirmation that it is necessary in a gratuitous sense, that is, that reason *needs* precisely something *gratuitous*, which is simply another way of saying, as Fr. White does, that reason naturally desires something that lies beyond its natural capacity.

⁶⁰ Consider, again, Fr. White's explanation at *Wisdom*, xxvfn9.

grace does not destroy, but rather elevates and purifies, nature: it opens to nature vistas that *may* not otherwise have been accessible to it, without their being for all that any less natural. According to Gilson, considered historically, the encounter with Christian revelation broadened the scope of philosophy. This point, which Fr. White objects to in Gilson, has been very clearly affirmed by the Magisterium:

Revelation clearly proposes certain truths which might never have been discovered by reason unaided, although they are not of themselves inaccessible to reason. Among these truths is the notion of a free and personal God who is the Creator of the world, a truth which has been so crucial for the development of philosophical thinking, especially the philosophy of being. There is also the reality of sin, as it appears in the light of faith, which helps to shape an adequate philosophical formulation of the problem of evil. The notion of the person as a spiritual being is another of faith's specific contributions: the Christian proclamation of human dignity, equality and freedom has undoubtedly influenced modern philosophical thought. In more recent times, there has been the discovery that history as event—so central to Christian Revelation—is important for philosophy as well. It is no accident that this has become pivotal for a philosophy of history which stakes its claim as a new chapter in the human search for truth.⁶¹

The more one reduces reason to its discursive operations, the more difficult it becomes to accommodate this point, for in that case the data of revelation could be included as having significance for reason only as an essential part of rational demonstration, and this would compromise both the gratuity of faith and the integrity of reason.

But we can draw out an even more provocative implication. The reason that metaphysics cannot positively define itself as excluding revelation is that philosophy would thereby make itself *essentially* theological in an improper way: the possibility that revelation will be irrelevant to the meaning of God as the cause of being cannot be determined prior to revelation. To make that determination, then, presupposes revelation, which means that, if one *defines* metaphysics as studying being as being in a manner that excludes the illumination of faith, one is building a theological judgment into the essential structure of one's metaphysics. But acknowledging this point pushes us a step further. It is not enough for us, given this point, simply to insist on reserving judgment regarding the relevance of revelation (which is what Heidegger means by defending an *essentially* atheistic philosophy as a means of respecting theology). While such a reservation is

⁶¹ *Fides et Ratio*, 76.

possible in principle, a possibility that could no doubt be realized in certain circumstances, the fact of the matter is that revelation has been given. If it is possible for faith to illuminate reason (without compromising its rational character), then, granted that as part of the Western tradition we do our thinking *de facto*—and whether or not we are believers—within a horizon that has been definitively stamped by Christian revelation, we cannot in principle exclude the possibility that our most basic philosophical concepts have been colored in profound and subtle ways by revelation.

Here is the claim, then: To the extent that this is so, as Ferdinand Ulrich has pointed out, it follows that *it is in fact only a person philosophizing in faith who is able to philosophize purely naturally*, because only such a one is able positively to acknowledge the gratuity of the light that comes “from above” and so avoid appropriating it as a light generated by its own labors.⁶² According to Ulrich, the most significant philosophies in the modern—that is, post-Christian—era tend to be pseudo-philosophies because they are hiddenly theological, by which he means that they are systems of thought that have coopted profound elements of Christian revelation, which they have falsified in this case precisely by so doing.⁶³ To the extent that this is true, faith is no obstacle to engagement with modern philosophy, as those who insist on “natural reason” as a means of dialogue might fear, but in fact presents a privileged entry into the heart of these philosophies, as well as a clarifying light that enables the liberation of reason in its naturalness. If we accept the principle that grace does not destroy nature, but elevates and perfects it, we must allow that faith can elevate reason without annulling its natural character. Indeed, we would have to affirm that reason therefore becomes more fully reasonable, more truly and authentically natural, under the generous activity of grace. In this case, just as we affirm that the divine Personhood of Christ does not eliminate the natural operations of his human nature, and just as

⁶² Ferdinand Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus: Das Wagnis der Seinsfrage*, 2nd edition (Freiburg i.Br.: Johannes Verlag, 1998), 2.

⁶³ *Homo Abyssus*, 56. This judgment is not unique to Ulrich, of course. He himself cites Erich Przywara in making the claim. Indeed, it is, from a different perspective, the point of Heidegger's critique of ontotheology, which would mean that the light of faith would put one in a privileged position to engage with the whole tradition that Heidegger intends by this critique. Heidegger's critique itself is simply an echo of Nietzsche's judgment that the German philosophers were all secret theologians. More recently, Jean-Luc Marion has pointed to the specifically Christian notions that lie in the philosophies of Descartes, Malebranche, Leibniz, and others: see “Christian Philosophy: Hermeneutic or Heuristic?” in *The Visible and the Revealed* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 66–79, here 67.

we affirm that there are “infused” natural virtues that are distinct both from acquired natural virtues and from specifically theological virtues, so too must we say that there is a distinction between philosophy carried out in some explicit manner in faith and theology in the strict sense.

The work of Ferdinand Ulrich, in fact, provides a striking example of the possibilities of such a philosophy. Hans Urs von Balthasar described Ulrich’s thought as a metaphysics that “stands in intimate contact with the mysteries of revelation, offers an access to them, and yet never abandons the strictly philosophical domain. In this sense it overcomes the baneful dualism between philosophy and theology, and it does so perhaps more successfully than ever before.”⁶⁴ Although there is no room in the present context to give an account of his philosophy,⁶⁵ it is worth mentioning a basic feature of his thought, which exemplifies what we have been discussing in this last section. Ulrich seeks to understand being as being, and in this sense his thinking is a work of metaphysics from first to last. Moreover, he works out his understanding in the context of a profound engagement with a host of modern thinkers, Christians and atheists alike: Schelling, Hegel, Nietzsche, Marx, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and so forth. And yet, following Aquinas’s principle that “*omnis agens agit sibi simili*,” Ulrich interprets being as the “*similitudo divinae bonitatis*.”⁶⁶ But the trinitarian perichoresis and the incarnation of the Son reveal the depths of God’s goodness, of which being is the likeness. Thus, one of Ulrich’s basic aims is to think through the non-subsistence of *esse* by analogy to the Father’s self-donation in the generation of the Son, and the Son’s kenosis in the incarnation. This leads to an extraordinarily rich understanding of the ontological difference between being and beings (*das Sein* and *das Seiende*), and of the meaning of man who allows being to come to fruition in his reason and love. In short, it is an interpretation of being as love, an ontology that Ulrich describes as transcending itself toward anthropology, which in turn transcends itself toward Christology.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ This is a quotation from a letter that Balthasar wrote to Ulrich, a passage from which appears as a “blurb” on the cover of *Homo Abyssus*.

⁶⁵ For an excellent account of Ulrich’s approach to philosophy and the central themes of his thought, see Stefan Oster, “Thinking Love at the Heart of Things: The Metaphysics of Being as Love in the Work of Ferdinand Ulrich,” *Communio* 37 (Winter 2010): 660–700. See also Martin Bieler’s introduction to *Homo Abyssus*, XII–LIV.

⁶⁶ *De veritate*, q. 22, a. 2, ad 2.

⁶⁷ *Homo Abyssus*, 1: “Im Zug der Sache habe ich daher die Ontologie in die Anthropologie und diese in die Christologie überstiegen.” Note, he does not “impose” the higher perspective, but rather follows the natural “pull” of the matter itself: “im Zug der Sache. . .”

But the explicit acknowledgment of the data of faith does not mean his philosophy overreaches the natural realm of reason. To the contrary, the very generosity of the goodness revealed in the Christian mysteries liberates nature and natural reason, so that in principle, the closer one gets to the center of those mysteries, the firmer is the foundation of the autonomy of philosophy.⁶⁸ Thinking inside the Western tradition, one does not best protect the integrity of philosophy by establishing an *a priori* “no” to faith, but by saying “yes,” like Mary, who represents for Ulrich the authentic meaning of “*natura pura*.” Though the phrase is used here in a sense completely opposed to the typical connotation, like all things transformed by grace it both surprises and fulfills its initial meaning. John Paul II, in conjunction with the Church Fathers, likewise points to Mary as a sort of *Realsymbol* of philosophy in *Fides et Ratio*:

And just as in giving her assent to Gabriel’s word, Mary lost nothing of her true humanity and freedom, so too *when philosophy heeds the summons of the Gospel’s truth its autonomy is in no way impaired. Indeed, it is then that philosophy sees all its enquiries rise to their highest expression.* This was a truth which the holy monks of Christian antiquity understood well when they called Mary “the table at which faith sits in thought”. In her they saw a lucid image of true philosophy and they were convinced of the need to *philosophari in Maria*.⁶⁹

In the end, we can affirm, with Fr. White, the indispensable character of natural knowledge of God. And we must affirm everything necessary to preserve its genuinely natural character. One of those necessary things is an intrinsic and positive openness to revelation, an openness that will in fact require the explicit acknowledgment of faith the more this knowledge comes to be within the historical situation of an intellectual tradition informed by Christianity, and the closer this knowledge comes to matters directly implicated in the faith. What we must therefore reject is epistemological semipelagianism, which insists that reason remains natural only to the extent that it remains uninformed by faith. But this means we must also and therefore reject any approach to natural theology that forces us into a false dichotomy: *either* the data of faith function as a

⁶⁸ This of course does not mean that any given philosopher who acknowledges faith will necessarily have a purer philosophy than any given non-Christian philosopher. Rather, the principle leaves open the possibility that an ostensibly atheistic philosopher may nevertheless betray an even greater openness, however hidden, to the invitation of grace in his thinking than even the one who explicitly affirms faith.

⁶⁹ *Fides et Ratio*, 108. Emphasis added.

premise within philosophical reasoning, in which case both the integrity of reason and the gratuity of faith are compromised, or faith has no bearing on the meaning of philosophical concepts. We cannot avoid this dilemma if we reduce reason to its discursive operation. To respond to the philosophical problems of modernity requires, indeed, that we recover the ancient σοφία, which Aristotle defined as an ordered unity of νοῦς and ἐπιστήμη. In other words, it requires an embrace of the classical notion of reason, one that affirms the priority of intellectus over ratio, and so one that gives a central place to the *given* in our thinking and the *descent* in our reasoning, by which we open our eyes more and more widely in wonder to the mystery of being and the even more luminous mystery of its first cause. This wonder, which is the heart of philosophical reason, is not dulled but is rather doubled when we come to realize that that which we could never have anticipated has always already been present to us all along the path of discovery. N-V