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## Does the Catholic Church Teach That There Is No One True Philosophy?

John F. X. Knasas

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*Abstract:* This paper assesses various reasons for the claim that a Catholic should avoid being a proponent of a one and true philosophy. Rather, within limits, a Catholic philosopher ought to be a conceptual pluralist. These reasons include Pope John Paul II's remarks in *Fides et Ratio* like the following: "The Church has no philosophy of her own nor does she canonize any one particular philosophy in preference to others." (para. 49) Also, Gerald A. McCool in his *From Unity to Pluralism: The Internal Evolution of Thomism* argues that ironically the twentieth century Thomistic revival refuted the perceived call of *Aeterni Patris* to return to the conceptual formulations of Aquinas. In that respect, this paper considers three "Thomistic" arguments for philosophical pluralism as put forth by J. M. Le Blond during a famous debate between French Dominicans and Jesuits following the Second World War. Le Blond's "Thomistic" arguments include: the abstractive character of concepts, the equivalency of being and the true; and the epistemology of intellectual dynamism. My conclusion is that neither the Pope nor Aquinas is a proponent of philosophical pluralism.

I recall a run-in with a colleague. It was during the Spring of 2000. I was on sabbatical and preparing to write a book on the philosophical resiliency of the twentieth-century Thomistic revival.<sup>1</sup> Informed of this project, my colleague immediately quipped back, "Neo-Thomism, oh that is heretical!" For my colleague, just as there was no stereotypical way to be a great baseball player, a saint, or to build a charming city, so too many different apologetics exist for defending Catholic truth. One could use Bonaventure's, Anselm's, Scotus's, Augustine's, Pascal's, etc. But not only *was* there no one set of philosophical concepts for expressing the Catholic faith, there *could not* be, and so in claiming that Thomism was *the* conceptual expression of truth, neo-Thomists were heretical. In other words, what the neo-Thomist has to understand is that just as the Church in the very important area of the spiritual life does not anoint any one particular style of spirituality, viz., Jesuit, Cistercian, Franciscan, Carmelite, etc., so too in the comparatively less

important area of philosophy, the Church again does not and could not select any one philosophy as the true philosophy. So the neo-Thomist is out of line.

Now if what this colleague claimed expressed the mind of the Church itself, many would have a serious problem. For some Catholic intellectuals their religious faith is the one and only thing. They need nothing else and want nothing else. They have what they need to live, and as a result they are indifferent to whether philosophy can attain the truth. If they are interested in philosophy, it is only because they find that some philosophical ideas are helpful to articulate the faith. But this use of philosophical ideas is all done in total abstraction from whether these ideas are philosophically validated. Other Catholic intellectuals are interested in the philosophical project to grasp truth and express this interest in the attempt to do metaphysics, i.e., to come to a fundamental understanding of reality. This philosophical project is as old as the Greek thinker Thales who thought that everything was basically water. This project is animated by the intellectual grasp of a "sameness" or "commonality" pervading all things, and as Etienne Gilson narrates in *Being and Some Philosophers*, the history of philosophy can be understood as an unrelenting series of attempts to work out the correct definition or basic description of this commonality.<sup>2</sup> But the point is that since there is intellectually this one commonality, then there is *in principle* one fundamental understanding of reality. Somewhat similarly, since there is intellectually one commonality in the isosceles, equilateral, and right angle triangles, then there is one understanding of triangle, and that has been worked out in geometry. But, for my colleague a Catholic's interest in such a philosophical project would be not only a waste of time but also morally vicious just as the desire of one man for many women is considered to be false and vicious.

I want to assess critically the claim that Catholicism morally requires philosophical pluralism. To accomplish that end, I will consider briefly the 1998 encyclical *Fides et Ratio* in which John Paul II asserts "The Church has no philosophy of her own nor does she canonize any one particular philosophy in preference to others." (para. 49) I will also take a longer look at *From Unity to Pluralism: The Internal Evolution of Thomism* by Gerald McCool, S.J., in which the author claims that Aquinas himself was a philosophical pluralist.<sup>3</sup> My own conclusion will be that neither the Church nor Aquinas is a philosophical pluralist.

### 1. *Fides et Ratio*

It would be singularly tragic if *Fides et Ratio* is remembered as an assertion of philosophical pluralism. Whatever the previously quoted line means, it does not mean that. A wider reading shows John Paul II reiterating the Church's commitment to the view that the human intellect can fashion "certain basic concepts [that] retain their universal epistemological value and thus retain the truth of the propositions in which they are expressed." (para. 96) The attached note cites *Humani Generis* (1950) in which the notions and terms hammered out to understand dogma are based upon "principles and notions deduced from a true knowledge of created things."<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, though John Paul reiterates the standard ecclesiastical recommendation of Aquinas as a model of how to synthesize faith and reason, the Pope is clear (para. 79) that he intends to go beyond this recommendation to something more substantial. For the well-being of systematic and moral theology, the Pope recommends (para. 97) a metaphysics, a philosophy of being (*philosophia essendi*), that is based upon the act of being (*quod actu ipso "essendi" sustentantur*). If this sounds Thomistic, it does so because it is. Affixed footnote 115 directs the reader to the Pope's 1979 Angelicum address on the centenary of Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris*. This address leaves no doubt that *Fides et Ratio* is referring to Aquinas's central metaphysical notion of *actus essendi*. The Pope says that through this *actus essendi* understanding of what is meant by the existence of a thing, Aquinas's philosophy is so open to all of reality that the human intellect comes to know God.<sup>5</sup> John Paul certainly appears to be presenting Aquinas's metaphysics of *actus essendi* as an unsurpassable human achievement. Everything else that is true will find a place within this metaphysics.<sup>6</sup>

How is this new substantive papal recommendation compatible with the earlier mentioned line that the Church has no philosophy of her own nor does she canonize any one particular philosophy? All readers of the encyclical must be honest and attempt to reconcile both claims. This reader sees no contradiction because though the Pope presents Aquinas's *actus essendi* doctrine as the Church's clear preference, he presents it as no more than a recommendation. By the earlier remark the Pope makes it clear that the Church will never go further and "canonize," or place its infallible and solemn seal of approval on any one philosophy. The wisdom of this approach is that the Church both encourages philosophers who may need encouragement and yet leaves philosophers free to disagree with each other. This approach assures that their mutual agreement will be attained by a particular doctrine making the philosophical case for itself.<sup>7</sup> In short, the Church has an official philosophy, even though she does not say so officially.

Hence, in this latest statement on the relation of faith and reason, the Church, through the person of the Pope, gives more than a wink to those philosophers who carry on their activities in a "classical" frame of mind. Nothing in the encyclical warrants saying that the Church teaches that no one true philosophy exists or that the Church has made the pluralist turn.

## 2. McCool's *From Unity to Pluralism*

Falling like a bombshell in this debate is Gerald McCool's *From Unity to Pluralism: The Internal Evolution of Thomism*. His ironic thesis is that the Church has unwittingly taught a *de jure* philosophical pluralism in and through recommending Aquinas. Most Catholic intellectuals perceived Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879) as a papal trumpet call to propound Aquinas's philosophy as the one true philosophy. Though it seems more accurate to claim that the encyclical recommends not a philosophy but a way of doing philosophy, viz., with faith functioning as an extrinsic norm,<sup>8</sup> Leo did lionize Aquinas's philosophical position as a synthesis

of what previous Church doctors had achieved. Leo compares their doctrines to "scattered members of a body" into which Aquinas placed a wonderful order, along with important additions.<sup>9</sup> That image did suggest to readers that the Church was opting for a definite philosophy—Aquinas's. Hence, historians rightly consider the encyclical as bestowing a decisive impetus to the twentieth century Thomistic revival.<sup>10</sup> But as McCool tells the tale, the evolution of the revival ironically refuted the perceived call of the encyclical to return to the conceptual formulations of Aquinas. In the interpretative work of such key Thomists as Maréchal, Rahner, and Lonergan, conceptual formulations became relative and contingent. What is stable and invariant is one's innate and constitutive intellectual dynamism to a supra-conceptual term described either as Infinite Being (Maréchal and Rahner) or as the notion of being (Lonergan). Concepts form in the wake of this dynamism and attempt to express its term. But they succeed imperfectly. Hence, metaphysical pluralism must exist.<sup>11</sup> Necessarily, a number of conceptual expressions of the real exist; each is a true but finite expression of the real. Furthermore, this view of philosophies was Aquinas's, even in respect to his own philosophy.

The watershed moment for this pirouette in the revival was after World War II and prior to Pius XII's *Humani Generis* (1950). A heated and acrimonious debate flared up between the French Dominicans and Jesuits.<sup>12</sup> The Dominicans (M.-M. Labourdette, M.-J. Nicolas, and R. Garrigou-Lagrange) argued for the mind's ability to frame concepts that provide the foundation for a definitive fundamental expression of reality. The speculative system adequately based upon these concepts is the one true philosophy. It is an absolute grasp of the truth. On the other hand, the Jesuits (H. Bouillard, B. de Solages, J. M. Le Blond) argued that human concepts are essentially imperfect. Speculative systems obviously possess the same limitation. Hence, no system is the one true system. No system possesses the absolute truth. Rather, necessarily, or *de jure*, a plurality of systems exists. Each system tries desperately to express reality but always falls short. In its conceptual expression, each philosophy is the proverbial flea on the elephant. Each flea describes the elephant from its limited perspective. Accordingly, Bonaventure's metaphysics will better express something about reality than Aquinas's and vice versa.

What I propose to do is to assess the possibility of "Thomistic" pluralism by investigating Le Blond's particularly apt reasons for pluralism. In his "L'Analogie de la Vérité," *Recherches de science religieuse* 34 (1947): 129–141, Le Blond provides three apparently Thomistic grounds for pluralism. Unlike secular thinkers who base pluralism on the indeterminacy of the data to underwrite any one philosophical conception, the Thomist Le Blond bases pluralism upon an overwhelming richness of the data and the essential poverty of our concepts about that data. But the result is the same: in principle, or *de jure*, there can be no one conceptual expression of the truth.

### 3. Le Blond and the Abstractive Character of Concepts

I want to begin with Le Blond's third Thomistic case for a *de jure* pluralism of philosophies.<sup>13</sup> In sum, the intellect uses concepts to approach reality. Concepts are abstractions. Abstractions leave something out about reality. Hence, even in its most fully developed concepts, the intellect's reach for reality falls short. Even when the intellect is conceiving a portion of reality, the abstractive nature of conception necessarily entails that that portion is only partly known. Just as the sense of sight picks up the one side of reality that is color and the sense of hearing picks up the side of sound, so too concepts and formulations thereof pick up one side of reality but hide others. If reality is 5, then any conceptual expression of reality is always 4 plus some decimal. As an abstraction, i.e., as something that leaves something out, any concept necessarily only *approximates* the real. Obviously, this fact, if true, leaves room for other approximations of the real, and so philosophical pluralism results.<sup>14</sup>

No Thomist could disagree with the "words" of this argument. As abstraction proceeds from real instances given in sensation, abstraction leaves out content found in those real instances. For example, in the isosceles, right angle, and equilateral triangles sketched on the blackboard, I intellectually perceive something the same that does not run through the square and the circle. I call this something, this commonality, "triangle." As common to the three figures, it does not include what distinguishes one figure from the other and so is appreciated as "leaving out" aspects of the data. But the crucial claim of Le Blond's argument is that as "leaving out" aspects of the data, the concept should be regarded as disidentifying itself from reality. Le Blond is thinking that as an abstraction, the concept is *only* and *simply* a part of the whole from which it was drawn, and you cannot identify a part with its whole. So again, the crucial point is the correctness of Le Blond's contention that as abstractive, concepts should be regarded as disidentifying themselves from reality. As abstractive, are concepts *in no respect* identical with the whole from which they are drawn?

To other Thomists, Le Blond's reasoning for conceptual pluralism from the abstractive nature of our concepts is victim to an unnuanced understanding of Aquinas's position on abstraction as initially presented in Aquinas's early *De Ente et Essentia* (1252-1256). In sum, Aquinas explains that abstraction can be carried out *either* with precision *or* without precision.<sup>15</sup> Le Blond misses this distinction by identifying abstraction itself with one of its subdivisions, viz., abstraction with precision. Let me explain. What is typical about non-precise abstraction is the relation of the abstracted essence, or commonality, to the particularities of the data, for example, the relation of "man" to the white complexion of Tom and the black complexion of Dick. When abstracted without precision, the essence does not "cut" itself from the particularities of the data but continues to remain "open" to them. For example, though "man" is not understood to be white or black, it is understood to be able to be, to be open to being, white or black. In other words, the essence abstracted without precision is still regarded as a "potentiality" for the particularities. It does not exclude what it does not include. Hence, in non-precise abstraction, there is a significant sense in which the commonality does *not* "leave out," but continues to

*include*, aspects of the real. Le Blond interprets all abstraction as *simply* and *totally* leaving out aspects of the data. He appears to have no recognition of what Aquinas designates as abstraction without precision.

Since non-precise abstraction keeps the essence basically identical with the real individual, non-precise abstraction does not render the essence simply a portion of an existent. This basic identity between the essence and the individual allows a predication of the essence to the individual. In predication essence is identified with the individual, e.g., "Socrates *is* a man." In other words, the non-precisely abstracted commonality is for all of its "leaving out" still basically identical with the whole from which it was abstracted. Instead of being a portion of the whole, the non-precisely abstracted essence is the whole considered in a certain respect. For example, the meaning of "man" is a consideration of Socrates from a certain respect. As such it is a stable fix that may be patiently probed without any fear of being undercut by what it leaves out. One realizes that one is looking at the essence of man. Furthermore, one knows that one is looking at something that has one definition. The trick that remains is working out the definitional parts of that essence. And that may involve long and arduous wrangling and debate that *de facto* never has an end. But one has already closed off the possibility that in principle, or *de jure*, there is no one conceptual expression of the truth.

On the other hand, abstraction with precision again grasps the same essence, or commonality, but in a different fashion. Here the abstraction does cut off the essence from the particularities of the instances. Now essence does exclude what it does not include. The essence is not considered as open to, or in potency to, the particularities of the data. In this case, essence is *unqualifiedly* or *simply* a part of the entire existent. In such a status, essence is unable to be identified in predication with the individual. For example, besides abstracting human nature in Tom, Dick, and Harry as "man," one can abstract it precisely as "humanity." And so, while one can say "Tom is a man," one cannot say "Tom is humanity." At best one can say only "Tom has humanity." This way of speaking about humanity indicates its abstraction in the precise manner.

Obviously if abstraction is always and only carried out in a precise fashion, then necessarily any one concept is going to leave something behind for another concept. It will do no good to say that what one concept leaves out another concept includes so that together both concepts are an expression reality. The problem is that if all concepts are precise, then the mega-concept formed by the other two must be precise also. The mega-concept will, then, leave something out. Apparently, this will leave room for another mega-concept. The conceptual inability to grasp the whole, even from a perspective, creates the impression that our awareness of the whole is non-conceptual. This sets the stage for subordinating concepts to something else, e.g., like the Transcendental Thomist supra-conceptual dynamism of the intellect to Infinite Being. Le Blond actually touches on this in his last reason examined below. From the viewpoint of abstraction, none of that is necessary if one recognizes that non-precise abstraction can provide that prior awareness of the whole.

#### 4. Le Blond on the Equivalency of Being and True

In a second argument for *de jure* conceptual pluralism, Le Blond begins by recalling from Aquinas the equivalency of being and the true.<sup>16</sup> But being is purely and simply in God and deficiently and imitatively in creatures. Hence, the true should be likewise. At best creaturely truth is a deficient and never equaling imitation of divine truth. In the light of Aquinas's view of reality, no philosophy could claim to be *the* expression of the truth. The claim to possess *the* expression of the truth would mean that one has climbed the ladder of being to the divine level. This is so preposterous and foolish that it does not even merit a dismissal. So, just as no created being can claim to be the representation of being as such, so too no speculative system can claim to be the expression of truth as such. Le Blond ends by adding the disclaimer that his position is not a denial of truth. Just as finite created beings are really and properly beings, so too finite truth is really and properly truth.

Here, too, no Thomist would disagree with these words. Everyone talks the same language. The disagreement is over the meaning of the words. In particular, does "deficiently true" mean a concept that only approximates reality or does it mean a concept that grasps reality but never expresses reality fully. In short, does the phrase designate a concept abstracted with precision or a concept abstracted without precision? Now the concept that is intended to be an expression of reality is the concept of being, the *ratio entis*. It is the subject of the most universal science, metaphysics. But this is a status that belongs to it as a *human* science. Metaphysics is not the most universal science absolutely speaking. Above it is theology and the divine knowledge itself shared in a brief fashion by the mystics and in a permanent fashion by the blessed in heaven. So the concept of being, the *ratio entis*, is deficient. But the crucial issue is in which of the above two manners is it deficient?

If the concept of being is precise, the concept automatically becomes just one partial perspective, simply a piece of the whole, admitting other perspectives and pieces. Aquinas's concept of being would itself be one of these pieces. But there will be others. This all means that there will be no overarching commonality, or concept, among these concepts of being. Each concept of being is at best an approximation. This conceptual plurality is what you have in Heidegger and in Transcendental Thomism. For both there is something over-arching all concepts of being, but it is non-conceptual. In his *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, Heidegger says that this larger context is *Dasein's* own temporality which in turn is glossed in terms of an ungrounded freedom. In the wake of that radically free temporality, *Dasein* projects the various concepts of being.<sup>17</sup> For the Transcendental Thomists, the over-arching item is not non-rational; it is more positive than that. But it is still non-conceptual. It is the dynamism of the intellect to Absolute Being. I will return to it in my analysis of Le Blond's last case for conceptual pluralism.

But if being is abstracted non-precisely, then it will not exclude what it does not include. In a significant sense, the *ratio entis* will not "leave out" that from which it abstracts. By such a behavior, the *ratio entis* will achieve a stable and definite conceptual fix on reality. One can then patiently explore that fix with the real hope of attaining the definition or basic description of the commonality.



Fortunately, Aquinas makes it unmistakably clear that the *ratio entis* is a non-precise abstraction. This characterization comes out in some famous texts on the *ratio entis*. These texts are from the *Quaestiones de Veritate* at I, 1c, and XXI, 1c. In the course of both articles Aquinas explains how one makes addition to one's thought of being. One does not do this by bringing back in what the concept had left out. Rather, one makes addition here by making explicit, or surfacing, what the abstracting of the *ratio entis* had rendered implicit to the *ratio*. Aquinas's description of the addition phenomenon especially suggests that the *ratio entis* does not take a slice of the real and simply leave something out. In fact, as a transcendental notion, it is true that the *ratio entis* "leaves out" nothing at all. Far from intellection ending up with something thin and impoverished, the intellection of the *ratio entis* attains an object with a richness that could never be realized in the parade of instances from which it was drawn.

This understanding of the *ratio entis* comes out especially in *De Ver.* XXI, 1c. Aquinas begins by describing three ways in which addition can be made to something. The second way deals with addition to non-precisely abstracted notions. In the second way we consider the way in which a species is added to the thought of the genus, for example, going in thought from animal to man. This shift involves bringing in the thought of rational, called the "difference: *differentia*." But Aquinas insists that the thought of rational is not "wholly outside: *penitus extra*" the genus animal. The given reason is that if it were wholly outside, animal would be only a part of man, and since we cannot predicate a part of a whole, then we could not say, as we evidently do say, "Man is an animal." So, the thought of the genus both leaves out the difference and does not leave out the difference. The abstracting of the genus is not simply a matter of leaving out. How then are we to express the thought of the genus not leaving out the difference found in the species? Aquinas says that the difference that is determinately and actually contained in the notion of man is contained implicitly and, as it were, potentially (*implicite et quasi potentialiter*) in the notion of animal. All of this discussion of genus, species, difference, and predication of the genus of the species is clearly in respect to what the *De Ente et Essentia* describes as notions non-precisely abstracted. It manifests Aquinas to be a much more nuanced thinker on abstracted concepts than is depicted by Le Blond. Not every concept is simply a part, a slice. Some concepts continue to involve the differences from which they abstract and so continue to remain, in a significant sense, identical with the whole.

Turning to the *ratio entis*, Aquinas admits this second way of making an addition. But an important qualification exists. Even though a difference like rational is not wholly outside the essence of animal, it is still too extrinsic to be the model for understanding accurately the contraction of the *ratio entis* to its modes of substance and the various categories of accidents. A difference that retains any measure of extrinsicness cannot be a difference of being. The modes of being add to being not by bringing in something in any way extrinsic. The modes add to being simply by determining it. At *De Ver.* I, 1c, Aquinas says that the *modi entis* "express" what is unexpressed by being. The reason for the addition taking the form of "an

expression" is that every nature is "essentially" a being. Unlike a genus upon whose surface differentiation appears by adding things from the outside, being undergoes the addition of the supreme genera of substance and the various types of accidents by surfacing them from its depths. In other words, if a genus contains its differences implicitly but potentially, as Aquinas said at XXI, 1c, then being has to contain its differences implicitly but actually.<sup>18</sup>

This behavior of the *ratio entis* presents it as an abstraction still in very close contact with the real. The intellect achieves the *ratio entis* by a non-precise abstraction that manages to keep the differences of things actually contained, though rendered implicit. The *ratio* does not leave out anything in a manner that would permit it to be trumped by another concept of being. Rather, it is the one and only concept of being possible.

The debate over the understanding of being will, then, not be over whether the understanding of being is in terms of one concept or of many concepts. The concept of being is one. The proper subject of the debate will be over the correct basic description of the one *ratio*. Elsewhere I have argued that for Aquinas the *ratio entis* is an abstraction from the self-manifestly real data provided by sensation.<sup>19</sup> This interpretation contrasts to that of the Transcendental Thomists who ascribe an *a priori* origin for the *ratio*. The just mentioned comparison of the *ratio* to the *ratio animale* and other objects of non-precise abstraction underline the *a posteriori* interpretation. Yet if being is an *abstractum*, then a deeper understanding of the *ratio* lies along the path of a deeper understanding of the sensible data. Aristotelian Thomists can argue from real accidents to the substance and how further analysis necessitates understanding sensible substance to be hylomorphically composed.<sup>20</sup> At this point the most basic understanding of being is in terms of "*habens forma*," a possessor, or haver, of form.

Existential Thomists argue that in the light of Aquinas's immediate realism of sensation, the analysis of the data should be further deepened. For reality also to cognitively exist, reality cannot be real of itself or intrinsically. This conclusion indicates the presence of a more profound *actus* than *forma*. This *actus* is what Aquinas calls *esse*.<sup>21</sup> Aquinas uses *esse* to describe better the *ratio entis* in terms of *habens esse*. I think that it is philosophically cogent. So, if any talk remains of the *ratio entis* "leaving out," then it is not in respect to anything that would produce a further basic description. Instead what is "left out" is an expressed knowledge of all the different substances that are *habentia esse*. For instance, before I saw a platypus, I never could have imagined that a mode of being could take that form. And I freely admit that neither I nor anyone has or will ever see the end of the parade of different substantial modes of being. It is in this respect that a philosophical Thomist will concede to Le Blond that creaturely truth is deficient and does not equal divine truth. Human understanding cannot express every thing implicitly but actually contained within being. Nevertheless, one thing is known for sure—any mode of being will be a *habens esse*.

### 5. Le Blond and the Epistemology of Intellectual Dynamism

Third, building from his just analyzed second argument whose major premise was the equivalency of being and truth, Le Blond launches into a fairly detailed epistemology.<sup>22</sup> He notes that just as for Aquinas something is a being only in and through a relation to Pure Existence, so too human truth should imply a relation to God. This relation is the tendency of the human spirit to the Absolute. This tendency is the "form" of every affirmation and is implied in the copula of every judgment. The diverse representations in the affirmation are the "matter" of the affirmation. In other words, the basic contact of human knowing with reality is found in its tendency to the Absolute. Truth is apportioned to other things in and through their relation to that dynamism. Since the mind's contact with Reality is supra-conceptual, an impassible divide exists between even the most clear and best built human system of thought and Truth itself. The best human system will never be the best possible. In the wake of this epistemology, no absolute system, no unique system, can exist. Hence, the Thomist synthesis exists side by side with that of Bonaventure, Duns Scotus, and Suarez as complementing rather than opposing positions. All these systems and future ones are part of the asymptotic effort of human person to reach the Absolute.

Once more let me say that no Thomist would dispute the words here, but the meanings or interpretations that Le Blond attaches to the words. In light of the reply to Le Blond's second case for conceptual pluralism, a philosophical Thomist would point out that no necessity exists to interpret the human mind's relation to God to be as immediate as Le Blond depicts. At *De Ver.* I, 1c, Aquinas says that we resolve all of our concepts into the *ratio entis*. Since for Aquinas being is the nature of God, then in resolving all of our concepts into the *ratio entis*, we are in a fashion relating all of our knowledge to God. But this concept of being is the same one that I have been talking about—the one and only concept of being that there is. Hence, the philosophical Thomist can keep the implications of the equivalency of being and the true without interpreting human truth's relation to God in terms of a supra-conceptual dynamism that creates conceptual pluralism.

Le Blond cites no Thomistic texts for an interior relation of the mind to God. What he does appear to do is echo the Thomistic epistemology of Joseph Maréchal, S.J., in *Cahier V* (1926) of his *Le Point de départ de la métaphysique*, Maréchal waxes eloquent about an innate and constitutive intellectual dynamism to Infinite Being. Moreover, Maréchal cites Thomistic texts. Do the citations support understanding the relation of creaturely truth to divine truth in terms of a supra-conceptual dynamism of the intellect? Elsewhere I have presented a study of the texts that answers the question in the negative.<sup>23</sup> A summary of my findings is as follows.

First, the defense of the non-contradiction principle at *In IV Meta.*, lect. 6, does not presume, as Maréchal supposes, that the principle is an *a priori* that can nevertheless be shown to have objective value. The reason why is simple. Aristotle, Aquinas, and their opponents are all *a posteriori* realists. Everyone regards their thinking to be based upon the facts. Aristotle and Aquinas think that reality is consistent, while their opponents think that reality is contradictory. Aristotle and Aquinas's

defense is to observe that the realism of their opponents should render their thinking contradictory and so reduce them to the level of plants. On the other hand, if the opponents want to keep their thinking consistent, then in light of their realism they should acknowledge that reality is consistent. No party begins by claiming that the non-contradiction principle could be a law merely of the mind. Again, everyone is a realist. Yet Kantian skeptical opponents with whom Maréchal is arguing do begin without realism. They assume that the principle could be just a law of the mind. Neither Aristotle nor Aquinas are addressing these opponents. Hence, it is far from clear that Aristotle and Aquinas would be concerned to validate the objectivity of an *a priori* factor. Rather, both in *lectio* 6 and in *Quaestiones de Anima* 5c, the notion of being and the first principle based upon it receive an abstractive validation. It is worth noting that the characterization of the first principle as *per se notum* never meant to preclude as a source of its concepts an acknowledgment of an abstraction from real sensible things. The denomination "*per se notum*" excluded a syllogistic validation of the first principle.

Second, Aquinas's talk at *S. T. I*, 12, 1c, and *I-II*, 3, 8c, about the natural desire for God is not about something innate to the intellect. Rather, it is an *a posteriori* occurrence. It "kicks in" once God's existence has been known from sensible things. The desire consists of the attempt to understand what God is after having proven that God exists. In other words, it is a particular application of the intellect's first operation, which tries to grasp the *quidditatis rei*, to a cause discovered from metaphysical reflection upon sensible things. Before that discovery, there is no actual intellectual desiring as Aquinas understands these words. Within this *a posteriori* context Aquinas understands Augustine's "My heart is restless until it rests in You."

Third, texts like *De Ver.* 22, 2, ad 1m and *S. T. I*, 6, 1, ad 2m, that speak of an "implicit" desire for, and knowledge of, God also do not amount to anything like the Transcendental Thomist *a priori* intellectual dynamism. To desire God implicitly means to desire things made in God's likeness. And such a doctrine is subsequent to a proof of God as the all-perfect being in whose likeness everything is made. Likewise, cognitive beings implicitly know God in any object of knowledge because every single thing has been made in the likeness of God. To know a thing is, then, to know God. Aquinas's doctrine of an implicit knowledge of God indicates nothing *a priori*. Rather, it is a gloss on *a posteriori* knowledge once the status of things as creatures has been discovered through *a posteriori* reasoning.

Fourth, Aquinas's agreement with the opening words of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, "All men by nature desire to know," also does not signal what Transcendental Thomists call the *a priori* and constitutive intellectual dynamism. Rather, in Aquinas's commentary, the intellect's natural desire to know is simply its natural desire to know by abstraction. The knowing powers are "inclined" to receive, not to project. Transcendental Thomists assume that every inclination has to be an imposition of a projection.

Fifth, neither does Aquinas's talk at *De Ver.* 10, 6, and *In IV Meta.*, lect. 6, of the first principles as "naturally known" and "inborn" signal any *a priori* for the human intellect. In line with the contexts of these remarks, one should understand

the natural and inborn knowledge of the first principles in terms of the inborn capacity of the agent intellect to abstract the principles immediately and with ease. Similarly we say that someone is a natural born baseball player. This remark does not mean that the individual is born with the ability to throw a curve ball. Rather, we mean that the individual is born with the capacity to acquire the ability with ease. In this way also the human intellect reflects to some extent the mode of divine knowledge by way of interiority. Rousselot argues that intellectual creatures, i.e., angels and humans, must in some respect reflect the creator's way of knowing reality in and through knowing himself. Hence, angels have innate species of things and humans have innate knowledge of first principles.<sup>24</sup> But the texts admit the *a posteriori* Thomist interpretation that the first principles are inborn because we are naturally disposed to abstract them so easily.

Sixth, nor does any need exist to appeal to intellectual dynamism to establish the subject matter of metaphysics—*ens commune*, appreciated as an intelligibility able to be realized in spirits as well as bodies. Supposedly, intellectual dynamism beyond the material order is the prompt for the judgment of separation that a being is not necessarily a body. But using the work of Canadian Thomist, Joseph Owens, one can regard this description of the subject of metaphysics as a reflection of a more mature understanding. Though no science proves its subject, other things about the subject matter are proven. For instance, the natural philosopher demonstrates matter and form as the intrinsic principles of *ens mobile*. Among these things proven of the subject matter, why can one not include knowledge of the subject's extent? Discovering *ens qua ens* as the commonality in sensible things both really and cognitively existing, the metaphysician will go on to broaden that concept by proving immaterial realities like the rational soul and possible separate substances.<sup>25</sup> This activity is not accurately described as proving the subject of metaphysics. In truth, it is an establishing of the full extent of a subject matter that has already grounded metaphysics.

My sixth comment indicates that for Aquinas not all objects are profiled up and against something larger as claimed in Transcendental Thomism. The *ratio entis* is "objectified" from data, a multiplicity, of real sensible things. Its broadening beyond the material order is also achieved by adding data to the multiplicity that originally suggested it. The additional data consists of the rational soul and separate substances as at least possible. As just noted, both are known by the metaphysician through *a posteriori* reasoning.<sup>26</sup> Hence, though the metaphysician does not prove the subject matter of metaphysics but, like every other science, discovers it, the metaphysician does go on to establish the extent of that subject matter. It is true that the earlier appreciation of sensible things included an awareness of these things as finite and limited and that this awareness occurs against something larger. But this something larger can be being understood as a natural and spontaneous *abstractum*. Up and against the *ratio entis* any thing as an analogate of that analogon will appear as finite and limited. Given that the thing shows the *ratio* only through the thing's difference, the thing will always appear as limited and finite against the intelligible backdrop of the *abstractum* of being. In sum, the mental phenomena so dear to Transcendental

Thomists for its supposed indication of a dynamic intellectual *a priori* can be given a home in a *posteriori* Thomism.

Finally, Aquinas's claim at *De Ver.* I, 9c, that the intellect knows truth by a reflection upon itself also does not trumpet a reference to an intellectual dynamism whose objectivity is retortively achieved. In the context of earlier articles of question I, Aquinas is referring to the intellect's own grasp of the conformity between its formulated propositions and what it apprehends in sensible things themselves. Consequently, the intellect understands that it is geared to conform itself to reality.

No doubt, proponents of Transcendental Thomism will go on to cite new texts or to give new twists to old texts. Their reading of Aquinas is a genie out of the bottle and so the interpretive game will continue. Other Thomists must remain open to the further moves in the debate. But for the time being at least the *a posteriori* Thomist reply possesses sufficient inertia to be undisturbed by textual sniping. Only a response in kind, viz., a substantial one, can effect the drift of the *a posteriori* interpretation.

Philosophically speaking, it is just as well that Maréchal's approach fails to square with the texts. Despite his protestations to the contrary, Maréchal's *a priori* approach has difficulty reaching anything real. Maréchal's tell-tale sign for achievement of objectivity in our thinking is ineluctability. If what is doubted is shown to be affirmed in the very doubt, the doubt destroys itself. So, for example, to deny truth, affirms truth by affirming the truth of the denial. Truth appears as something that the mind cannot shake off. As temptingly streamlined as this approach is, the skeptic can always reply that ineluctability is just what you would expect if we are dealing simply with how the mind works. Hence, if Aquinas did maintain a constitutive *a priori* dynamism to infinite being, his philosophy would fall short of realism. Not only real things but real possibilities would be beyond the reach of our knowledge. That conclusion means that we have no assurance that the concepts forming in the wake of intellectual dynamism are even approximations of something real. Pluralism collapses back into skepticism.<sup>27</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

Because of Aquinas's concept of being, Thomism, as I understand it, cannot be a proponent of pluralism. First, as abstracted without precision, the concept of being is appropriately regarded as all embracing. It leaves nothing out. Hence, unlike conceiving animal by adding Fido and Flicka to the data pool of Tom, Dick, and Harry in which one grasps the concept man, no further data from which one can form another and opposing concept of being exists. Even what Transcendental Thomists call the intellect's supra-conceptual dynamism is not in fact supra-conceptual. The concept of being is what ignites intellectual dynamism, and so the true home of the dynamism is within the context of the concept of being. Second, since there is one concept of being, there must be one and only one definition, or basic description, of the concept of being. In principle, then, Aquinas's thinking excludes many true definitions of being. Third, in fact, however, philosophers have formulated many

definitions of being. Consider the parade of philosophers described by Gilson in *Being and Some Philosophers*. Hence, if not in principle, must Thomism admit pluralism at least in fact, *de facto*? Fourth, I do not think so. As noted, I find Aquinas decisively moving also on the topic of being's basic description. In sum, Aquinas's basic understanding of the *ratio entis* is in terms of *habens esse*. Aquinas works out this basic understanding through the defensible claim that individual things genuinely exist in two strikingly different ways, really and cognitively. This fact reveals real existents to be compositions of some particular nature and its *esse*. These individual compositions are reflected in the *habens esse* understanding of the *ratio entis*.

But is it not *hubris* and a cultivation of personality to refuse to admit that Aquinas's position on being amounts simply to that of "the best so far?" A Thomist like Alasdair MacIntyre in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry* insists that Thomists must accept this more humble description of Aquinas's work.<sup>28</sup> But other Thomists can insist that MacIntyre has misplaced the humility. Where we must be humble is before the fact that with *esse* Aquinas illustrates that apart from which a thing is nothing. It is humility before that fact and not pride or cultic devotion of Aquinas that leads other Thomists to avoid relativizing terminology of "the best so far." Apart from *esse* no further metaphysical ground, no metaphysical, remainder, exists.

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#### Notes

1. John F. X. Knasas, *Being and Some Twentieth-Century Thomists* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003).
2. "We have now, I think, succeeded in identifying the new task which lies ahead of us. It will be to experiment on the following theme: what happens to the notion of being when actual existence is removed from its comprehension?" Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952), 6.
3. Gerald A. McCool, *From Unity to Pluralism: The Internal Evolution of Thomism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992).
4. Cf. "The Unity of Metaphysics," *Thought* 28 (1953): 411, in which Robert F. Harvanek argues that *Humani generis* "would not seem to touch upon the question whether different concepts have different values, nor upon the issues generally involved between the philosophy of the concept and the philosophy of the judgment." Despite a noted disagreement with Le Blond (403, n. 58), which in my opinion is a disagreement without a difference, Harvanek's criticisms of the philosophy of the concept are indebted to those of Le Blond, especially Le Blond's epistemology of intellectual dynamism; *vd.*, *infra*, Section 5. Harvanek's argument from pluralism also depends upon a view of analogy in which there can be no conceptual expression to the sameness between analogates (393-401). That such is not Aquinas's view, especially in regard to the *ratio entis*, *vd.* *infra*, Section IV.
5. "The basis and source of this openness [to the whole of reality in all its parts and dimensions] lie in the fact that the philosophy of St. Thomas is a philosophy of being, that is, of the 'act of existing' (*actus essendi*) whose transcendental value paves the most direct

way to rise to the knowledge of subsisting Being and pure Act, namely to God." John Paul II, "Perennial Philosophy of St. Thomas for the Youth of Our Times," *Angelicum* 57 (1980): para. 6, 139–140. Also, 140–141. Cf., "Without recommending any particular system of philosophy, [John Paul II] has defended the Church's right to take a stand against those systems of philosophy whose principles and conclusions she has found to be incompatible with Christian revelation." Gerald McCool, "From Leo XIII to John Paul II: Continuity and Development," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 60 (2000): 176.

6. Likewise, "To conceive God as the Act of being pure and subsisting by itself, cause and end of all other beings, is by the same token to give oneself a theology that can do justice to whatever is true in other theologies, just as the metaphysics of *esse* has what is needed to do justice to whatever is true in other philosophies. Because it includes all of them this theology of the uncreated Act of being, or of the God whose proper name is *I Am*, is as true as all of them together and truer than any one of them taken separately. Here is, if I am not mistaken, the secret reason for the choice the Church has made of St. Thomas Aquinas as her Common Doctor." Etienne Gilson, cited by Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne: An Old Layman Questions Himself about the Present Time*, trans. by Michael Cuddihy and Elizabeth Hughes (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), 134. Also *Fides et Ratio*, paras. 57–61. The Pope's Angelicum address (139) reads Vatican II's Decree on Priestly Formation (*Optatum Totius*) within the context of the Thomistic capacity to assimilate the truth of other philosophies. McCool, *Unity and Pluralism*, 229–230, reads the Counciliar document as an admission of pluralism.

7. In his *Thomism in an Age of Renewal* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), Ralph M. McInerney details what he understands to be a minimal and a substantive response to the Church's recommendations of Aquinas. Minimally, all Catholic intellectuals should have Aquinas as a model for their attempts to integrate faith and reason (163–164). Substantively, the Catholic intellectual is antecedently obliged to begin his activities with a sincere study of Aquinas. Yet this antecedent obligation is not a consequent obligation to agree with Aquinas (197–198).

8. Vd. Armand Maurer, "Gilson and *Aeterni Patris*," as edited by John F. X. Knasas, *Thomistic Papers VI* (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1994), 94–97.

9. *Aeterni Patris* as published in *One Hundred Years of Thomism: Aeterni Patris and Afterwards, A Symposium* (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1981), 187.

10. Cf. "Whether the envisaged Christian philosophy is pluralistic or monochrome, is not a concern of the encyclical itself. That question is properly and rightly left for philosophical consideration. Probing of it belongs to a genuinely philosophical tribunal. In a word, the goal strived for in *Aeterni Patris* is Christian philosophy as pursued down the ages. Whether that philosophy is pluralist or monotone is not its concern." Joseph Owens, "Neo-Thomism and Christian Philosophy," in *Thomistic Papers VI*, 35–36.

11. Gerald A. McCool, *Catholic Theology in the Nineteenth Century: The Quest for a Unitary Method* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1977), 257–259; *From Unity to Pluralism*, chap. 9, but especially 214–219.

12. For a clear narrative of this gripping foundational debate, see Robert F. Harvanek, "Philosophical Pluralism and Catholic Orthodoxy," *Thought* 25 (1950): 21–52. For the Dominican point of view, especially as involving Marie-Michel Labourdette, see Aidan Nichols, O.P., "Thomism and the Nouvelle Théologie," *The Thomist* 64 (2000): 1–19.

13. Le Blond, "L'Analogie de la Vérité," 139.



14. The inability of concepts to capture the real is even more dramatically expressed by an earlier Jesuit. In his *The Intellectualism of St. Thomas* (1908), Pierre Rousselot wrote: "The idea that intellect essentially deforms and mutilates reality, that it is the faculty of the unreal, is to-day so wide-spread that it has found its way into current literature and conversation. 'Every word that a child utters,' a novelist has said, 'is a hecatomb of concrete things. When he plucks a narcissus near by and gives it the name of flower, a name common to a thousand other flowers and narcissi, he classifies it, he expresses its nature, he reduces it to a state of shadow and abstraction, and the flower he names is not the one he has gathered; it has lost its colour and its perfume.'" O'Mahony trans. (New York, Sheed and Ward Inc.: 1935), 3. In sum, just as a botanist is foolish to think that he can study the living flower by plucking it from the earth, so too the intellectual is foolish to think that he can study reality in his abstractions.
15. See paras. 6–13 of Chapter Two in Armand Maurer's translation, *On Being and Essence* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1968), 38–44. For a useful commentary on these pages, see Joseph Owens, "The Accidental and Essential Character of Being in the Doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas," edited by John R. Catan, *St. Thomas Aquinas on the Existence of God: the Collected Papers of Joseph Owens* (Albany: State University of New York Press: 1980), 84–90.
16. Le Blond, "L'Analogie de la Vérité," 130–131.
17. See Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, as translated by Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 286–291. Though in *Basic Problems* Heidegger does not mention *Being and Time's* characterization of *Dasein* as Being-towards-death, a reader can accurately inject it into Heidegger's description of authentic existential understanding on 286–291.
18. For this description I am indebted to James Anderson who in his *The Bond of Being: An Essay on Analogy and Existence* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969) says that an analogous concept abstracts from its inferiors imperfectly "so as to include them actually and implicitly." (256) Also, "The analogical concept is radically different: it has only a relative or proportional unity, and it does not include the diversity of its inferiors potentially. . . . In order that it may not be univocal in any degree, therefore, the analogical concept must include diversity actually, without in any way rendering that diversity explicit." (256–257) Anderson's words about analogy are in the order of first intention. For a discussion of Ralph McInerny's thesis that analogy is only a logical doctrine, or only a matter of second intention, see my "Jacques Maritain and Ralph McInerny on Analogy," edited by Z. Zdybicia and A. Maryniarczyk, *Wiernosc rzeczywistosci (Loyalty to Reality)*, a memorial volume in honor of Rev. Albert Krapiec, O. P. (Lublin: PTTA, 2001), 101–116.
19. John F. X. Knasas, "Aquinas's Metaphysics and Descartes's Methodic Doubt," *The Thomist* 64 (2000): 449–472.
20. For a cogent presentation of the analysis, see Richard J. Connell, *Substance and Modern Science* (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1988).
21. "In fact, one may claim that it is exactly this double existence of the same thing, say the Parthenon or a man or a horse, that enables metaphysics after Avicenna to get off the ground. The one thing is found to exist in two different ways. This shows that the thing itself is not the same as either existence, thereby setting up the basic problem of metaphysics, namely being qua being in contradistinction to the things that have being." Joseph Owens, "The Range of Existence," *Proceedings of the Seventh Inter-American Congress of Philosophy*

(Québec: Les Presses de L'Université Laval, 1967): 57. "This doctrine of cognition involves a metaphysics in which things are other than their being, and in which the same individual thing can have different ways of being." Joseph Owens, "Aquinas on Cognition as Existence," *Proceeding of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 48 (1974): 77–78. The Thomistic source for this thinking is Aquinas's *De Ente* reasoning for the claim, "So it is clear that the nature of man, considered absolutely, abstracts from every being, but in such a way that it prescind from no one of them." (Maurer trans., *On Being and Essence*, 47.)

22. Le Blond, "L'Analogie de la Vérité," 131–134.

23. Vd. "Transcendental Thomism and the Thomistic Texts," *The Thomist* 54 (1990): 81–95; "Transcendental Thomism and *De Veritate* I, 9," *Thomistic Papers VI*, 229–250; "Intellectual Dynamism in Transcendental Thomism: A Metaphysical Assessment," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 69 (1995): 15–28.

24. Pierre Rousselot, *The Intellectualism of Saint Thomas*, 21–24.

25. A refrain among Transcendental Thomists is: "You can know the finite only if you know the infinite; you can know the limited only if you know the unlimited." See the insistences of Maréchal's disciple, Joseph Donceel, *Natural Theology* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1962), 20, 59, 66.

26. Vd. John F. X. Knasas, "Aquinas on the Cognitive Soul: Metaphysics, Physics, or Both?," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 72 (1998): 501–527.

27. In his "Philosophical Pluralism," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 58 (1984): 173–187, Nicholas Rescher argues for "orientational pluralism." He describes it this way, "It is foolishness to say that an orientation-bound position is not worth having in a domain where a position is only to be had on this basis. Once we see that contentions whose justification is orientation-bound are the most we can in principle hope to validate in philosophy, we are well enroute to recognizing why this is the most we should ever ask for. It is rationally inappropriate to demand something that cannot be had. Orientational pluralism does not deny that the pursuit of truth remains the pivotal aim of philosophizing. But it insists that we can only carry on this pursuit according to our own lights. In philosophy as in all human inquiry we aim at the absolute and definitive capital-T Truth. But all we can ever attain is our (potentially erroneous and problematic) view of the truth. And this is good enough." (181) This optimism is whistling in the dark. For again, why should we think that the "orientation to truth" is an objective orientation?

28. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1990), 64.