

# What's Wrong with the Ontotheological Error?

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## I. Introduction

In some circles, 'the ontotheological error' is a buzz-word, a dismissive pejorative hurled at philosophical theologians who say that God falls under the concept 'being'. The accusation is that to say that God falls under the concept 'being' is to imply that God is *a* being, alongside others. Whatever good-making features may otherwise be ascribed, God is thereby brought down to the level of creatures. Perfect-being theology makes God differ from creatures only in degree and not in kind. To believers in such a God, critics of ontotheology charge: your God is too small!

My questions are "what?" and "why?": what exactly is the ontotheological error? and why is it an error? The label itself makes clear: ontotheology is a species of philosophical theology. My second question, therefore, breaks in two: what philosophical mistakes is ontotheology thought to make? and why are these taken to be theologically disastrous?

## II. Ineffability versus Personality

In a way, this controversy goes back to the earliest days of Christian philosophical theology, may be epitomized in the contrast between Plotinus and Augustine.<sup>1</sup> The *via negativa* strand of Plotinus' philosophy identifies the One, which is absolutely simple, as the ultimate explainer. Plotinus presupposes a semantics according to which predications of the form 'S is P' posit a composition between the subject of the property and the property. Metaphysically, predications posit a potency-act distinction: the subject is in potency to receiving the property which actualizes it. Plotinus concludes that where positive properties are concerned the One is ineffable. It cannot even be said that the One is [a] being.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, knowledge implies a distinction between cognitive subject and cognitive object. So the One is not a knower and hence not a willer.<sup>3</sup> Rather the One necessarily emanates the next hypostasis Intelligence which is a composite of receiver and what is received<sup>4</sup>; and One through Intelligence necessarily emanates Soul; and One through Intelligence and Soul necessarily emanates the material world. Matter at the bottom is non-being, where the Great Chain of Being runs out.<sup>5</sup> Plotinus maintains that the ultimate explainer itself stands in no need of explanation, but explains the existence of anything and everything else as productive cause.<sup>6</sup> The One also explains the

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, scholars find Plotinus himself as well as his Neoplatonist followers vacillating between a *via negativa* posture and something closer to the one I ascribe to Augustine. See A.H. Armstrong, *The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus* (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkart Publisher, 1967), and John J. O'Meara, *Studies in Augustine and Eriugena*, ed. by Thomas Halton (Catholic University of America Press, 1992), chs. 12, 14-16, 146-165, 195-229.

<sup>2</sup> Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. by Stephen MacKenna (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1969) V.4.1, 400-401; VI.9.6-7, 619-621.

<sup>3</sup> Plotinus, *The Enneads* V.3.10-12, 391-395.

<sup>4</sup> Plotinus, *The Enneads* V.3.15, 396-398; V.4.1-2, 400-402.

<sup>5</sup> Plotinus, *The Enneads* II.9.1-3, 132-135; III.2.2, 161-162; III.6.7, 208-209; V.1.6, 373-375; V.2.1, 380-381.

existence of everything else in its role as Final Cause: everything other than the One has a built-in tendency to return to the One, so that the whole cosmos executes a kind of *exitus/redditus* dynamic.<sup>7</sup>

Overall, this strand of Plotinus' philosophy posits the ultimate-explainer as Wholly Other, not a being, but beyond being, the ineffable source of all else. In an understandable sense, Plotinus' god is as big as a god could get. No danger here of mistaking the creature for the Creator! Certainly, Plotinus's philosophy is religious. What devotees are to aim for is a kind of mystical reunion with the source of all being. Certainly, Augustine read and was influenced by Plotinus and/or other platonizing philosophers. They, along with Cicero and hand-me-down Aristotle, were his introduction to philosophy. Augustine tells us that the platonic distinction between the material and immaterial and its conception of evil as a privation of being were key to finding his way out of Manichaeism.<sup>8</sup> Certainly, Plotinus' portrait of the One as wholly other and ineffable satisfies the theological desideratum of avoiding idolatry, of not confusing the creature with the Creator.

Nevertheless, the project of formulating Christian philosophical theology called attention to other theological desiderata, other phenomena to be saved: the texts of the bible represent God as personal, as an intelligent voluntary agent, who interacts directly and through patriarchs and prophets with merely human persons, human persons who get drafted into forwarding Divine purposes in the world, human persons whose desires God hopes to shape through Divine presence and Divine commands. Biblical texts introduce us to God who is without peers, but they do not present God as utterly ineffable. Much of human religious traffic in prayer and worship is with a personal God who is presumed to have thoughts and to make choices. Thus, Biblical religion confronts the theologian with *the problem: which factor is to be weighed more heavily--texts and practices that insist that God is personal, or the demand to avoid idolatry?*

Perhaps encouraged by middle platonists, Augustine tries to have it both ways. Augustine begins with the platonizing philosophical framework and attempts to integrate it with the personalizing desiderata of Christian theology. Roughly speaking, Augustine's platonism collapses Plotinus' One with Intelligence, the first emanated hypostasis. Augustine's God is simple but not utterly ineffable.<sup>9</sup> Augustine's God is the source of everything other than Godself. Yet, God is not beyond being; God is Being Itself. Augustine agrees that by definition the ultimate explainer cannot have and does not need any external explanation. But--*pace* Plotinus--Augustine does not conclude that the ultimate explainer needs no explanation, but rather that Being Itself is self-explanatory.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Augustine's God is a knower-like Plotinus' Intelligence, thought thinking a plurality of Divine ideas--and--unlike either Plotinus' One or Intelligence—a willer.<sup>11</sup> Having concluded that Divine agency is intelligent voluntary agency, Augustine denies that God produces everything other than Godself by necessary emanation, but rather by free choice of will.

So, is Augustine guilty of ontotheology? True, Augustine denies that God is beyond being. But it doesn't follow that Augustine sees God as *a* being alongside others. As much as Plotinus, Augustine insists that the ultimate explainer has to be distinctive, necessarily without rivals. Nothing else is or could be such that its Being and Excellence are self-explanatory. Nothing else is or could be the ultimate

<sup>6</sup> Plotinus, *The Enneads* V.2.1, 380; V.3.11, 393.

<sup>7</sup> Plotinus, *The Enneads* V.2.1, 380-381.

<sup>8</sup> Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. by William Watts (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), Book VII.1-16; vol. I, 332-382.

<sup>9</sup> Augustine, *De Trinitate*, ed. by Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. III (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956) VI.6-7.8, 100-101.

<sup>10</sup> Augustine, *De Trinitate* V.2.3, 88; V.4-6, 88-89; V.10.11, 92-93; VII.5.10, 111.

<sup>11</sup> Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus LXXXIII*, Book I, q.46 "De ideis," *Patrologia Latina* Cursus Completus 40, 29-31. *De Trinitate* XV.17.27-31, 215-217.

explainer of the being and excellence of everything else. True, Augustine and Plotinus have a philosophical disagreement about the nature of explanation: about whether the ultimate explainer has to be beyond being and beyond explanation, or whether it explains F-ness here below by being self-explanatory with respect to F-ness. But why should this be theologically disastrous? True, Augustine's strategy may sound like it makes God a little less other: both God and creatures are explananda. But by styling God as self-explanatory F-ness, Augustine finds a way to fit God's role as ultimate explainer with a conception of God as personal. Self-explanatory Wisdom is not beyond Wisdom; self-explanatory Wisdom *is* Wisdom. God is All-Wise, just as the Bible tells us, just as devotees confess, just as one would expect paradigm personality to be.

Augustine claims that Divine agency is intelligent voluntary agency, affirms that God is just and wise, merciful and kind. Does Augustine--by personifying God--thereby make God too small? Augustine's bold answer was 'no'. In effect, he proposes a thought-experiment: think your way into Plotinus' system. However big you think the ultimate explainer is for Plotinus, tumble to the realization that that bigness is personal. Augustine's reintegration of platonizing philosophical frameworks identifies transcendent Goodness with Being Itself, and insists that personality, intelligent voluntary agency, is the heart of reality. God is paradigm intelligent voluntary agency. Angels and humans participate in it, are made in God's image as less excellent copies.

One might protest that this thought experiment leads to philosophical incoherence. What is simple cannot be paradigm wisdom *and* paradigm justice, cannot be literally wise or just. This reaction is understandable enough! But let us look more carefully about what it is fair to demand. Augustine isn't saying that we can take Plotinus as is and just add on the notion that the ultimate explainer is personal. He is launching a research program: start with Plotinus, save as much as possible while at the same time insisting that the heart of reality is personal. This demands a reintegration of philosophical and theological desiderata. Augustine himself made significant advances, but the effort to reach theoretical coherence kept philosophical theologians busy through the patristic period and the latin middle ages into reformed scholasticism, for over a thousand years.

Like Cartesians with colors, apophatic theology has to explain Divine personality away as at best ontologically superficial, and at worst a manner of speaking--a concession to the way the (unsophisticated?) human person engages religious encounters. Starting from Christian belief and practice, that is a significant cost. This is one reason why Augustinian platonism and scholastic Aristotelianism try for metaphysically distinctive intelligent voluntary agency, a self-explanatory explainer of the Being and Excellence of everything else.

### **III. Participation versus Univocity, or Aquinas versus Scotus**

Both Aquinas and Scotus fell heir to the problem of how to preserve Divine personality (intelligent voluntary agency in the Godhead) while avoiding idolatry. Recently, however, members of the Radical Orthodox School have insisted that Scotus is guilty of the ontotheological error, while Aquinas is not. Unfortunately, the evidently learned leaders of this movement do not treat historical texts and rival conceptualities with much precision, with the result that it is difficult to know precisely what they mean.<sup>12</sup> Certainly, one charge is that Scotus rejects Aquinas' metaphysics of participation.<sup>13</sup>

**Aquinas on Paradigm and Participation:** Where the metaphysics of participation is concerned, Radical Orthodoxy understands Aquinas to be forwarding three important theses. [1] First, Aquinas' God is *ipsum esse*<sup>14</sup> and is all perfection *per se*.<sup>15</sup> [2] Second, creatures--both with respect to their natures and with respect to their existence--are participations of the Divine. [a] The metaphysical constitution of creatable natures, their whatness, is grounded in the actuality of the Divine essence, insofar as each creatable nature is--at metaphysical bottom--a way of imperfectly resembling the Divine. Cow nature imperfectly imitates the Divine essence cow-wise; horse nature, horse-wise, etc.<sup>16</sup> [b] Moreover, Aquinas maintains that God--as *ipsum esse*--is boundless actuality, while creatures are analyzable into receiving subject and actuality received. Aquinas speaks of creatable natures as if they were subjects in potency to receive actuality. But what is received is received after the manner of the receiver. So when God gives creatable natures the gift of actual existence (*esse*), they contract it: cow-nature contracts *esse* to *esse bovem* (being a cow); horse-nature, to *esse equum* (being a horse). Individuators further contract being a cow into being Beulah rather than Elsie; being a horse into being Hi-Ho-Silver rather than Streaker. In general, participated *esse* is limited to being of some natural kind, while *ipsum esse* is boundless.<sup>17</sup> [3] Third, Aquinas holds that metaphysics analyses the structures of *ens commune*, which he identifies with *created* being qua being. God or *ipsum esse* is not included in the subject-matter of metaphysics, except incidentally insofar as metaphysics spawns cosmological arguments for the existence of God as source of all else.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, on Radical Orthodoxy's read, Aquinas' God as paradigm transcends creatures. God is not one being among others, all of which are subject to metaphysical analysis. Metaphysics is about creatures that *participate* in Godhead, creatures that owe *what* they are and *that* they are to what God *actually* is.

**Scotus on Univocity and Ontotheology:** Radical Orthodoxy charges Scotus with unraveling this synthesis. [not-3] Following Avicenna, Scotus not only holds that the proper subject-matter of metaphysics is being *qua* being. He goes on to maintain that there is a *univocal* concept of being that applies equally to God and creatures.<sup>19</sup> Radical orthodoxy protests that these moves subordinate God to being-in-general and make God subject to metaphysical analysis as one being among others. Not only does Scotus thereby commit the ontotheological error; he also wrecks Aquinas' participation metaphysics. [not-2] Whereas Aquinas joins Aristotle in insisting that actuality is prior to possibility, by insisting that the constitution of creatable natures is grounded in the actuality of the Divine essence, Scotus rejects this and falls into the trap of treating possibility as prior to actuality. Moreover Scotus refuses Aquinas' picture of creatable essences as potency receiving actuality

<sup>12</sup> John Millbank is the founding father of this movement. He retails his complaints against Scotus in many places including "Only Theology Saves Metaphysics: On the Modalities of Terror," in *Belief and Metaphysics*, ed. Connor Cunningham and Peter M. Chandler, Jr. (London: SCM Press, 2007), 452-500.

<sup>13</sup> For a clear and textually meticulous account of Aquinas' understanding of the science of metaphysics, as for his accounts of essence-esse composition and the metaphysics of participation, see John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), esp. chs.I-V, 3-176.

<sup>14</sup> Aquinas, *De ente et essentia*, ed. by M.D. Roland-Gosselin, OP (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1948), ch.5, 26, 37-42; *Summa Theologica* I, q.3, a.4 c.

<sup>15</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, q.2, a.3, c [the Fourth Way].

<sup>16</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, q.15, a.2, c.

<sup>17</sup> Aquinas, *De ente et essentia*, chs.4-5, 32-42; *Summa Theologica* I, q.7, a.1, c; a.2, c & ad 1um.

(*esse*) as a gift.

Certainly, Scotus and Aquinas have their philosophical differences.

*The Subject-Matter of Metaphysics*: So far as the subject-matter of metaphysics is concerned, both are party to a long-standing dispute within Aristotelian philosophy of science.<sup>20</sup> For Aristotle, a science is a system of propositions held together by the unity of its subject-matter. Such unity presupposes some general concept under which everything treated by that science falls. Aristotelian sciences aim to be something like Euclidean geometry, proceeding from real definitions and first principles by syllogistic deductive inferences to further conclusions. Not only are the propositions within a given science organized by entailment relations as premisses and conclusions; the sciences themselves form a hierarchy. Where the existence of a subject-matter needs proving, Aristotle declares, no science proves the existence of its own subject matter (e.g., physics does not prove the metaphysical possibility of motion), but takes over that conclusion from a higher science (e.g., music takes from mathematics the existence of proportions involved in harmonic intervals).

Where the subject-matter of metaphysics is concerned, two problems arise. First, Aristotle equivocates between generality (*Metaphysics* IV, c.1 1003a21-32) and excellence (*Metaphysics* VI, c.1 1025b3-1026a19) as the criterion for ranking a science higher or lower. Logically, it would seem that the subject-matter of the higher science should be more abstract and so include within its scope everything that falls under the lower sciences. Reasoning this way, Aristotle concludes that--since metaphysics is the highest science--its subject-matter should be being-qua-being. On the other hand, Aristotle's ontology includes beings--viz., the separate intelligences--that are not studied by the science of physics. Since they are more excellent than corporeal things, there must be some higher science--what could it be if not metaphysics?--that studies them. So, *is metaphysics properly the study of the structures of being precisely insofar as it is being, or is metaphysics theology?*

Both Scotus<sup>21</sup> and Aquinas agree with Avicenna against Averroes: the proper object of metaphysics is not theology, but being-qua-being. Both Scotus and Aquinas join Avicenna in using the principles of metaphysics to mount cosmological arguments for the existence of God as the self-explanatory source of the being, excellence, and activity of everything else. Both concur that metaphysics should examine what beings have in common, what the principal structures and categories of being qua being are, and investigate what the ultimate cause of being is. Where Scotus and Aquinas differ is about whether God falls under the abstract general concept that unifies the science of metaphysics, or whether God hovers at the margin of the domain of things that fall under that concept, and gets covered by metaphysics only insofar as Godhead is the cause of all else. Aquinas takes the latter option: he identifies the subject-matter of metaphysics as *ens commune*, which he restricts to created being. Following Avicenna, Scotus makes the opposite choice, the better to secure the comprehensive scope for metaphysics. Either way, we should not over-read the theological consequences. Aquinas himself distinguishes the *logical* participation of something in a general concept under which it falls, from the *metaphysical* participation of a subject in some actuality it receives. That something falls under an abstract concept, by itself, implies nothing about the thing's meta-

<sup>18</sup> Aquinas, *In De Trinitate*, q.5, a.4; Leonine 5.153-154, 161-162. See also *In duodecim libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis expositio*, Proemium (Turin-Rome: Marietti, 1950) 2; and *In librum beati Dionysii De Divinis nominibus*, c.V, 1.2 (Turin-Rome: Marietti, 1950), 245.

<sup>19</sup> Scotus, *Ordinatio* I, d.3, p.1, qq.1-2, 3; Vat III.1-123. For a truly magisterial analysis of Scotus and his successors on univocity, see Stephen D. Dumont, "The Univocity of Being in the Fourteenth Century: John Duns Scotus and William of Alnwick," *Medieval Studies* 49 (1987), 1-75; and "The Univocity of Being in the Fourteenth Century II: The *De ente* of Peter Thomae," *Medieval Studies* 50 (1988), 186-256. Needless to say, Dumont does not agree with Radical orthodoxy's readings!

<sup>20</sup> For excellent discussions of this debate in relation to Aquinas, see John F. Wippel, "The Latin Avicenna as a Source for Thomas Aquinas's Metaphysics," *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas II* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), ch.2, 31-64, esp. 33-43. See also his expansive discussion in his truly magisterial book *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), ch.1, 3-22.

physical structure or independence.<sup>22</sup>

A second and logically independent problem for Aristotelian philosophy of science is whether the abstract concept that identifies the unifying subject-matter of metaphysics applies to the things studied by the science univocally or only analogically. If the concept 'being' were like genus concepts in applying univocally to whatever fell under them (e.g., 'animal' is univocally predicated of Socrates and Beulah the cow), wouldn't that mean that being is a genus? But if being were a genus, then it would have to be divided by differentiae that come from outside the genus (the way the differentia rational is not included in but adds something to the genus animal). But what falls outside of being is nothing. Ancient Aristotle-commentators reasoned that--because Aristotle's categories are the highest genera--beings in one category could have neither genera nor differentiae in common with beings in another category. They understood Aristotle to conclude that the concept 'being' cannot be univocally but at most analogically predicated of substance and accidents. Aquinas followed this position, insisting that pure perfection terms and 'being' apply analogically, not only to items in different categories, but also to God and creatures.<sup>23</sup>

For his part, Scotus<sup>24</sup> returns to the notion that Aristotelian science is a system of propositions organized into sound deductive syllogisms. A syllogism--e.g., 'all A's are B's; all B's are C's; therefore all A's are C's'--can be valid only if the middle term 'B' is taken univocally in both premisses. Otherwise, there is a fallacy of four terms. Scotus concludes that metaphysics can furnish sound cosmological arguments from finite beings to infinite being, only if there is some concept of being that applies univocally to God and creatures.

As Richard Cross points out, this is for Scotus a *semantic* thesis.<sup>25</sup> As Stephen D. Dumont emphasizes, Scotus' concept of univocity is very thin, requiring only as much sameness of meaning as it would take to avoid the fallacy of four terms.<sup>26</sup> Aquinas advances cosmological arguments using metaphysical principles. How--Cross asks--could Aquinas deny that the concept 'being' deployed in them is univocal in Scotus' sense?<sup>27</sup>

In insisting on a univocal concept of being that applies across the categories and to God as well as creatures, Scotus separates the issue of whether there is an abstract concept that applies to X and Y from the ontological questions of whether X and Y have any common metaphysical constituents, say of whether X and Y share a genus or differentiae. Not only would Scotus agree with Aquinas and Aristotle, that the substance nature cow and the quality whiteness share neither genus nor differentiae. Scotus insists that while 'wisdom' is univocally predicated of Divine and created wisdom just as 'human being' is univocally predicated of Socrates and Plato; it doesn't follow that there is any common nature wisdom that exists in God and Socrates the way there is a common human nature that exists both in Socrates and Plato.<sup>28</sup> Univocal as opposed to analogical concepts do not jeopardize Divine otherness. We have only to review Scotus' cosmological arguments to discover how the univocal concept of being does not stand in the way of his concluding that God is simple, externally unproducible and independently productive, necessarily extant, immutable, eternal, etc.<sup>29</sup> Once we see how Scotus separates the issue of common *concept* from that of common *metaphysical constituent*, we can appreciate how the

<sup>21</sup> Scotus, *Quaestiones super libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis*, I, q.1; OPH III.15-72; *Reportatio* IA, Prologus, q.3, a.1; Wolter and Bychkov I.75-77.

<sup>22</sup> See John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite to Uncreated Being*, ch.4, 96-97.

<sup>23</sup> For a thorough and meticulous discussion of Aquinas' texts, see John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite to Uncreated Being*, chs.3, 65-93.

<sup>24</sup> Scotus, *Ordinatio* I, d.3, qq.1-2; Vat III.1-68; esp. nn.39-40; Vat III.26-27.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Cross, "Duns Scotus and Suarez at the Origins of Modernity," *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric and Truth*, ed. by Wayne J. Hankey and Douglas Hedley (Hants: Ashgate, 2005), 65-80; esp. 68-73.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen D. Dumont, "Scotus's Doctrine of Univocity and the Medieval Tradition of Metaphysics," *Miscellanea Mediaevalia*, Band 26. Ed. by Jan A. Aertsen & Andreas Speer. (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), 193-212.

<sup>27</sup> Cross, *op.cit.*, 71.

disagreement between Aquinas and Scotus is semantic and/or cognitive-psychological. Whichever side we take in this philosophical dispute, insinuations of immanent theological disaster seem over-wrought.

*The Metaphysics of Participation:* According to Radical Orthodoxy, modality is another area of disastrous disagreement between Aquinas and Scotus: Aquinas actuality is prior to possibility, while for Scotus it is the other way around. In the language of contemporary analytic philosophy, Aquinas is an actualist, while Scotus is a possibilist. Their reference is to Aquinas' claim that the possibility of creatable natures is grounded on the actuality of the Divine essence, insofar as creatable natures are at bottom ways of imperfectly imitating the Divine essence. Insofar participation includes imperfect resemblance, the very constitution of creatable natures is to be a way of participating in the Divine essence.

Scotus agrees that all creatable natures imperfectly resemble the Divine essence. But Scotus denies that creatable natures are constituted by imitability relations, for the philosophical reason that relations are metaphysically and epistemologically posterior to their relata. Therefore, the imperfect-resemblance relation presupposes both relata: not only the Divine essence but the creatable nature, and so cannot be what--at metaphysical bottom--constitutes the creatable nature.<sup>30</sup>

For Aristotelians, there are further philosophical problems with Aquinas' suggestion: viz., his theory would make all creatable natures at bottom relatives. This might capture well the metaphysical flimsiness that the original Plato ascribes to items in the spatio-temporal world of our experience. But it fits badly with the Aristotelian categories which Aquinas deploys in his metaphysical analysis of things here below. Substance, quantity, and quality are not relatives. Of course, someone could say that Aristotle's categories and imitability relations belong to different levels of analysis of what creatable natures are. But that would make Aristotle's categories superficial and imitability relations fundamental. The superficiality of Aristotelian categories is something at which Aquinas never hints.

For his own part, Scotus follows Avicenna in maintaining that the constitution of creatable natures pertains to them of themselves. Likewise, the non-repugnance of their constitutive formal principles pertains to them of themselves. That rational animality constitutes human nature is thus not grounded in anything else. To achieve philosophical coherence, Scotus does pay the price of denying that the *whatness* of creatable natures depends on the Divine essence. Nevertheless, Radical Orthodoxy ignores Scotus' insistence that creatable natures depend on God for any being they have: God's actually thinking them produces them in intelligible being, indeed in possible being; they depend on the Divine essence *principiative*.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, God's actually willing them produces them in *esse existentiae*. That human nature is intelligible and possible, all the more actually extant does depend on the actual existence, thought, and will of God.

Scotus also rejects the other thesis of Aquinas' participation-metaphysics that analyses creatures into a receiving subject (the creatable essence or individuated essence) and the actuality received (actual existence or *esse*). What spoils this idea for Scotus is his counter-principle that receiving subjects are naturally prior to what they receive. This is because--like efficient causes--intrinsic causes (material

<sup>28</sup> Scotus, *Lectura* I, d.8, p.1, q.3, nn.106-110; Vat XVII.37-38; *Ordinatio* I, d.8, p.1, q.3, n.135; Vat IV.220.

<sup>29</sup> Scotus, *Ordinatio* I, d.2, p.1, qq.1-2, nn.43-190; Vat II.151-243; d.8, p.1, q.1, nn.1-26; Vat II.153-164; d.8, p.2, q.u, nn.223-306; Vat IV.279-329.

<sup>30</sup> Scotus, *Ordinatio* I, d.35, q.5, nn.30-32; Vat VI.258-259; d.43, q.7, nn.14-18; Vat VI.358-361.

<sup>31</sup> Scotus, *Ordinatio* I, d.43, q.7, nn.14-18; Vaticana VI.358-361; *Reportatio* IA, d.43, q.1, nn.21-25; Wolter and Bytchov, 525-528.

and formal) are, and are what they are, naturally prior to what is caused.<sup>32</sup> Scotus distinguishes between subjective potency and objective potency. Pale Socrates is in subjective potency to becoming tan. There already actually exists something that is the subject, and it has a passive potency to receive tan color. But dodos are only in objective potency insofar as their constitutive principles (genus and differentia) are formally compossible.<sup>33</sup> Aquinas' picture treats creatable natures as being in subjective potency with respect to *esse*. But--Scotus insists--while there are as yet no cows, bovine nature is not actually something that has a passive potency to receive *esse* the way pale Socrates is actually something with a passive potency to receive tan color.<sup>34</sup> It makes no difference whether the priority in question is temporal or natural. Nor will it help to say that--while there are as yet no cows--bovine nature is actually something: viz., a way of imitating the Divine essence. For Aristotelian metaphysics does not treat relations as subjects of potencies for further actualization. Nevertheless, no *theological* disaster follows if there is no prior subject there to receive *esse* as a gift. What is amazing, for Scotus, is that God freely and gratuitously wills the existence of creatures, whatever their metaphysical constitution may be!<sup>35</sup>

Overall, then, Scotus departs from Aquinas' philosophical picture, where he takes it to be philosophically incoherent. Scotus pays the theological price of denying that the constitution of creatable natures is grounded in God. The philosophical pro's and con's of actualism versus possibilism are still debated. By and large, Radical Orthodoxy fails to understand how Scotus' doctrine of univocity distinguishes the thesis of conceptual univocity from that of common metaphysical constituents. It also confuses the issue of conceptual subordination (the essentially harmless notion of God's falling under the abstract univocal concept 'being') with ontological dependence (the metaphysical absurdity of God's ontologically depending on being-in-general) and/or act-potency composition (which Scotus and Aquinas agree is not to be found in God). Partly because of such misconceptions, Radical Orthodoxy fails to show Scotus' philosophical positions to be theologically disastrous.

## IV. Thomson's Heidegger: Ontotheology, Historicized

Fast-forwarding from the middle ages to the twentieth century, we find Heidegger claiming that metaphysics as practiced down through the ages is inherently ontotheological. Since I am not a Heidegger-scholar, I begin with Iain Thomson's helpful characterization,<sup>36</sup> which allows us to summarize Heidegger's position in three moves.

First, Heidegger maintains, metaphysics is the science of being qua being. Metaphysics divides into two familiar parts. On the one hand, metaphysics develops an analysis of what all beings have in common and of the fundamental categories of being. This is *ontology*. But metaphysics also seeks to know what is the highest and best of beings, or what is the source of beings. This is *theology*.<sup>37</sup>

Second, to this analysis of metaphysics as ontotheology, Heidegger adds a

<sup>32</sup> Scotus, *De Primo Principio*, ch.1, nn.2, 4; Wadding III.210-211; ch.2, nn.6 & 10; Wadding III, 219.

<sup>33</sup> Scotus, *Quaestiones super Libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis* IX, qq.1-2, nn.14-15, 21-22; OPH IV.512, 515, 518-19.

<sup>34</sup> *Quaestiones super Libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis* IX, q.5, nn.17-19; OPH IV.135-136.

<sup>35</sup> Scotus insists that God has no obligation to finite creatures to love them enough to create them, much less to make them part of the Trinitarian society of friends. See *Opus Oxoniense* IV, d.46, q.1, nn.8 & 12; Wadding X.252-254.

<sup>36</sup> See Iain D. Thomson, *Heidegger on Ontotheology: Technology and the Politics of Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); esp. ch.1, 8-29.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Martin Heidegger, "The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics," *Identity and Difference*, trans. by Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 53-63.



*historicist* thesis: that successful metaphysical analyses set the conceptual frame for an epoch of history, but that history is punctuated by crises in which one metaphysical analysis is replaced by another, which sets the frame for the next epoch.

Third, in some of his works, Heidegger invites those gripped by the concept of being to step outside the conceptual framework within which they have been operating and to try to get back to the original self-disclosure of being to which the successive metaphysical analyses were a response--whether through an analysis of early Greek poetry and etymologies or through some sort of phenomenological encounter.<sup>38</sup>

On Heidegger's analysis so understood, ontotheology is more or less inevitable as a human response to the world. Heidegger's historicism and invitations to encounter could be seen as balancing calls to humility. However much we engage in metaphysical analysis and work to develop a certain frame of ideas, we should resist the temptation to think that we can thereby master reality or nail down the truth once and for all. Historicism apart, disagreement in philosophy, the very fact that there have been and are very different incommensurate metaphysical analyses, should give us pause, loosen our grip, and invite us to a more open mind. Likewise, we should not mistake analysis for encounter. Indeed we should let our analysis be interrupted by encounter.

Certainly, on Thomson-Heidegger's analysis, both Aquinas and Scotus turn out to be ontotheologians. Both analyse the nature of being qua being, what beings have in common just insofar as they are beings, and what the fundamental categories of being are. Both use metaphysical principles to mount cosmological arguments to the ultimate explainer, who is the highest and best.

To a remarkable extent, Aquinas and Scotus both agree with much that Thomson-Heidegger says. Both Aquinas and Scotus see discursive reasoning as rooted in human cognitive psychology, in the way that we take in our surround. Yet, for both medievals, there is a difference between *ante-mortem* science--propositions framed in abstract concepts, arguments and inferences--and intuitive cognition of what is existant and present before our eyes. Both locate the goal of their search for ultimate reality, not in theoretical analysis, but in beatific vision and enjoyment of the Divine essence. Both agree with Heidegger: ultimate reality is not something we can grasp by our own powers. We must prepare, but we must also be open and wait for it to disclose itself.

## V. Ontotheology as Prayer?

Alternative readings emphasize Heidegger's later works and find him going further to advocate an end to metaphysics as ontotheology.<sup>39</sup> Bringing the lesson home to theology, critics conclude that all ontotheological frameworks are idolatrous because God outclasses our cognitive-psychological capacities. Metaphysics and philosophical theology are inherently blasphemous because they substitute human conceptual frameworks for reality. Often in the background is some broadly Kantian picture that God is not the kind of thing that could appear as an object of

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Heidegger, "The Principle of Identity," *Identity and Difference*, 23-41; "The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics," *Identity and Difference*, 65, 69, 73.

<sup>39</sup> See Henry Ruf, "The Origin of the Debate over Ontotheology and Deconstruction in the Texts of Wittgenstein and Derrida," in *Religion, Ontotheology, and Deconstruction*, ed. by Henry Ruf (New York: Paragon House, 1989), ch.1, 3-42. For a clear broad-strokes map of critiques of metaphysics by Kant, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Derrida, see Huston Smith, "The View from Everywhere: Ontotheology and the Post-Nietzschean Deconstruction of Metaphysics," in *Religion, Ontotheology, and Deconstruction*, ch.2, 43-66.

our experience. Neither can encounters with God (if any) be managed by the conceptual machinery we use to organize our experience of the world here below.<sup>40</sup>

This more radical Heidegger counts ontotheology pernicious, because--in the West--the "Kantian" epistemic role of organizing the subjective world of our experience has generalized into a culture of technology that regards things in the world as there to be used, managed, and controlled by us!<sup>41</sup> Thus, Merold Westphal<sup>42</sup> warns: doing metaphysics and philosophical theology stirs up our sinful desires for mastery and domination. The ontotheological project dangles the almost irresistible temptation to think that our conceptual frameworks are exclusively and permanently valid. Ontotheology is bad because it puts God in service of making the world intelligible to us and so at our manipulative disposal. Paraphrasing the later Heidegger, Westphal cautions: even if we resist the hybris of thinking we have everything conceptually nailed down, our efforts to demystify the world will prove sterile. Humans were created for encounter and worship. But the unproducible producer of ontotheology provokes no singing and dancing, evidently because it is not an appropriate object of worship.<sup>43</sup>

***Ontotheology in Its Place:*** Such ominous accusations seem, however, to judge the activity solely by its abuses. Religion exists to foster human attempts to live in relationship with what vastly outclasses us. Religion acknowledges the obvious: such relationships have to engage human cognitive and affective capacities. If Westphal et al advise us to abandon ontotheological projects, other theologians down through the ages try to respect Divine Otherness while insisting both that there is a place for ontotheology and that ontotheology can be kept in its place.

***Metaphor, Myth, and Multiple Ontotheologies:*** For a contemporary example, take John Hick's theory of religious pluralism. In *An Interpretation of Religion*,<sup>44</sup> Hick adopts a broadly Kantian picture, according to which the Real in Itself is not cognitively accessible to humans. The Real is trans-categorical in that it cannot be housed by the conceptual cubby-holes that the human mind invents. Nevertheless, Hick recognizes, the human race has responded to encounters with the Real in Itself by evolving a variety of complex religious practices--practices that eventually include not only authoritative narratives but also philosophical theology. Thomson's Heidegger allows a given ontotheology full sway for a time and a season, while warning that its epoch will come to an end. Hick counters: the plurality of the world's great religions shows that many competing ontotheologies are in play at the same time. Hick does not conclude that ontotheology is intrinsically pernicious. Instead, he issues twin cautions. First, Hick declares that the transcendence of the Real means that no ontotheological statements can be *literally* true. Ontotheological statements can be at most *mythologically or metaphorically true*, and that only insofar as they make a positive contribution to the wider religious praxis of producing saints. Second, if ontotheology is fine in its place, what is not alright is insisting that one religion (say, Christianity) is superior to others because its ontotheology is literally true while the others are literally false. The ontotheologies of the world's great religions are all mythologically or metaphorically true, to the extent that the world's great religions are equally successful in fostering growth from self-centeredness to altruism in their devotees.

***Ontotheology as Literally True:*** Hick has ontotheology without idolatry by

<sup>40</sup> For example, see Jean-Luc Marion, "The Impossible for Man--God," in *Transcendence and Beyond*, ed. by John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2007, ch.1, 17-43.

<sup>41</sup> See Heidegger, "The Principle of Identity," *Identity and Difference*, 33-41; "The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics," *Identity and Difference*, 51-52.

<sup>42</sup> See Merold Westphal, "Overcoming Onto-theology," in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. by John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 146-169.

<sup>43</sup> See Heidegger, "The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics," *Identity and Difference*, 72. I am grateful to Alan Padgett for calling my attention to this passage.

<sup>44</sup> John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, and London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1989).

down-grading the semantic status of its assertions as truth-bearers. For an attempt to combine literal truth with appropriate devotion, go back to St. Anselm of Canterbury in the eleventh century. According to Anselm, humans were made to love God above all and for God's own sake and eventually to receive the reward of requited love which sees and enjoys God forever.<sup>45</sup> Even apart from sin, such union with God exceeds our capacities and is ultimately a gift and reward.<sup>46</sup> The *ante-mortem* human vocation is to strive into God with all of our powers. Benedictine monasticism trains the will through disciplined obedience, and shapes the emotions through spiritual exercises.<sup>47</sup> Anselm's innovation is of notice that--because we don't have very many powers--all of them need to get into the act, the intellect included.

Anselm's *Proslogion* illustrates how this works. For Anselm--pace Westphal--intellectual work is a form of prayer. Its method is questioning and disputing. Anselm presses questions, waits for the 'aha' disclosure, and then formulates it in words. Questions are addressed to God. Disclosure comes from God, the Inner Teacher. As the "stupid, silly student," Anselm's part is to raise the questions, articulate insights, and then to question once again. On his analysis of human cognitive psychology, phenomenological disclosure and articulation go hand in hand. Yet, the articulations are never taken as final and the *ante-mortem* disclosures never fully satisfy. For one thing, even if--pace Plotinus--God is not utterly ineffable, God is incomprehensible, in the sense that we will never be able fully to grasp Who and what God is.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, understanding is a mean between faith and sight.<sup>49</sup> What we really want is face-to-face vision and enjoyment.<sup>50</sup> For the elect, this will be granted only after death. In the meantime, 'aha' disclosures and articulated understanding are the viator's consolation.<sup>51</sup>

Resting on theoretical laurels is contrary to our *ante-mortem* vocations. Nor is Anselm especially committed to the idea that striving into God will come to an end *post mortem*. On the contrary, Anselm declares, God is not only a being a greater than which cannot be conceived; God is a being greater than can be conceived.<sup>52</sup> Because Divine Goodness is unfathomable, all of our explanations of why God became human will be superficial. No matter how deep we go into God's reasons, there will always be more. Earlier, Gregory of Nyssa had suggested: the *Proslogion*-dynamic, with each discovery heightening desire and fueling further seeking, could go on forever.<sup>53</sup>

Already Aristotle had envisioned that the analytical work of philosophy would resolve into a happy contemplation of the results. In the thirteenth century, Bonaventure writes his *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* for university friars, who have already worked through physics, psychology, and metaphysics; friars who had already read or heard others read commentaries on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*. Bonaventure's book instructs friars who already have ontotheology under their cinctures, how to begin by contemplating God in and through the material world; then to turn inward to contemplate God in the essential workings of their own minds; then to turn attention upwards to contemplate God first as Being supremely simple and yet within all things and then as Goodness self-diffusing itself into a Trinity of persons. For these university friars, ontotheology is a prolegomena, which gives way to contemplation, which eventually boggles the mind with the realization that Tri-unity is Incarnate and crucified. Godhead overwhelms the

<sup>45</sup> Anselm, *Monologion*, c.lxviii; Schmitt I.78, 25- 79, 3. *Cur Deus Homo* II.i; Schmitt II.97, 4- 98, 5.

<sup>46</sup> Anselm, *Monologion*, c.lxix-lxx; Schmitt I.79, 12- 81, 6.

<sup>47</sup> Anselm, *Orationes sive Meditationes, Prologus*; Schmitt III.3, 2-4. *Proslogion*, cc.i, xiv-xviii, xxiv-xxvi; Schmitt I.97, 4- 100, 19; 111, 6- 115, 4; 117, 25- 122, 2. *Epistola de Incarnatione Verbi*, c.i; Schmitt II.8, 17-19.

<sup>48</sup> Anselm, *Monologion*, c.xxxvi; Schmitt I.54, 15-18; c.lxiv; Schmitt I.74, 30- 75, 16. *Proslogion*, c.i; Schmitt I.98, 3-5; c.ix; Schmitt I.107, 4-27; cc.xiv-xvi; Schmitt I, 111, 22- 113, 4. *Cur Deus Homo* I.ii; Schmitt II.50, 3-13.

<sup>49</sup> Anselm, *Commendatio operis ad Urbanum Papam II*; Schmitt II.40, 10-12.

<sup>50</sup> Anselm, *Proslogion*, c.i; Schmitt I.98, 14-15; c.xxiv-xxvi; Schmitt I.117, 25- 122, 2.

<sup>51</sup> Anselm, *Proslogion*, c.xxvi; Schmitt I.120, 23- 122, 2. *Cur Deus Homo* I.i; Schmitt II.47, 8-9.

<sup>52</sup> Anselm, *Proslogion*, c.15; Schmitt I.112, 12-17.

mind's processing capacities. Burning love for the crucified brings the mind to ecstasy, where love outruns cognition. The mind does not grasp, but is grasped. For Bonaventure, the statements of ontotheology are literally true, *and* Godhead is infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.<sup>54</sup>

Westphal's idea that we cannot sing and dance before the first cause fails to take seriously Who the first cause really is. Reread the *Proslogion*, and watch how Anselm's ontotheological results provoke rapturous outbursts of thanksgiving, of frustration and desire! *Fides quarens intellectum*. To deploy Anselm's method of correlation, what would keep the One before Whom we sing and dance from being the unproduced producer, the first cause of the being and excellence of all things?

Westphal warns: it would be the sin of pride to think our theories had nailed God down. Anselm counters: it would be a sin of sloth not to strive with intellect as well as emotions and will. Westphal charges: ontotheology substitutes theory for praxis. For his part, Anselm never draws the Aristotelian distinction between theoretical and practical science. Anselm insists, on the contrary, ontotheology is a dimension of praxis, because ontotheology is a form of prayer.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> See J. Warren Smith, *Passion and Paradise: Human and Divine Emotion in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa* (New York: Crossroad Publications, 2004), for a thorough examination of Gregory of Nyssa's position.

<sup>54</sup> Bonaventure, *Quaestiones Disputatae de Scientia Christi*, q.6; Quaracchi V.34-37; q.7; Quaracchi V.39-41; *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*; Quaracchi V.293-313.

<sup>55</sup> I have expanded on Anselm's practice of philosophical theology as a form of prayer in two earlier articles: "Praying the *Proslogion*," in *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith*. Edited by Thomas Senor (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995), 13-39; and "Elegant Necessity, Prayerful Disputation: Method in *Cur Deus Homo*," *Studia Anselmiana: Cur Deus Homo* (Roma 1999), 367-396.