

Father Thomas Joseph White on Wisdom in the Face of Modernity

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In *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity* Thomas Joseph White, OP, attempts to re-establish the natural theology of St. Thomas himself *in propria persona* — undiluted, undefiled, unassimilated, accept-no-substitutes-or-supposed-improvements — and to do so in the face of challenges that were not present in St. Thomas’s own intellectual milieu but have been especially (and, philosophically speaking, unnecessarily) influential in theological circles. I say, “Bravo, Father Thomas Joseph! And could you please take your road show next over to fundamental issues in moral theory and philosophical anthropology?”

I have been asked to comment specifically on the chapter on Karl Rahner. I’ll get to that in a moment. First, though, I would like to help situate the book as a whole within the general project of St. Thomas’s natural theology. For Father Thomas Joseph’s aim is almost breathtakingly ambitious — something that finally got through to me as I re-read for the second time what we might call the philosophical — as opposed to theological — culmination of the book, which occurs in Chapter Seven, “From Omega to Alpha: Toward a General Order of Metaphysical Inquiry.”

1. *The book as a whole and St. Thomas’s natural theology*

Let us begin with the assumption that the *locus classicus* for St. Thomas’s natural theology is the *Summa Contra Gentiles*. I trust that this is not a controversial assumption, though I would be willing to defend it against naysayers. My own aid to the imagination here is to think of St. Thomas as gathering up Augustine, Anselm and other important pre-13th century Catholic thinkers residing in Dante’s *Paradiso* and taking a trip to the First Circle of the *Inferno* for a working vacation. (I imagine them renting a recreational vehicle and traveling on the Inter-Last-Things Expressway.) Now after the nine introductory chapters of Book One, where Catholic readers are introduced to the notion of philosophical wisdom, shown the consonance between faith and reason, and assured that their faith is on sure intellectual footing even if they cannot understand the chapters that follow, St. Thomas begins in earnest his conversation with Aristotle, Plato, Avicenna, Averroes, and the others. Since they all share a wide array of philosophical assumptions, including metaphysical and epistemological realism, and since they are all familiar with (even if they don’t all accept) the basic concepts of Aristotle’s logic, philosophy of nature, and metaphysics, St. Thomas begins immediately in chapter 10 with his discourse on God, arguing in the first place that the existence of a God is not known *per se*, but that it can be demonstrated *a posteriori*. In other words, St. Thomas shares so much philosophical background in common with his interlocuters that he can begin his conversation with them at a very high level.

But wait. Two new visitors arrive on the scene — we’re not quite sure from which direction — representing the modernity in the face of which Father Thomas Joseph is staking his claim to wisdom. Their names are Immanuel Kant and Martin Heidegger. They rudely interrupt the conversation, asserting that it is infested by a virus called ‘onto-theology’ and that the first three books of the *Summa Contra Gentiles* are pure metaphysical bunk. Aristotle is visibly annoyed, but St. Thomas maintains his aura of cool confidence. Still, he does get that sinking feeling that all teachers experience when forced to go back to square one — a feeling that, apparently, even the beatific vision can’t completely obliterate. But not to fear. Out of nowhere, driving up (somewhat recklessly) in a black convertible with a rosary

dangling from the rearview mirror, comes a young Jewish Dominican waving a manuscript and shouting, “Here, St. Thomas, I have some extra chapters to insert between chapters 9 and 10 of Book One! They’re all based on what you’ve said in your other works, and they show that there’s a perfectly reasonable path of metaphysical inquiry that takes us from our initial sensory experience of the world right up to chapter 10. What’s more, taken together with chapter 10, they show that your natural theology is not guilty of the sin of onto-theologizing. This may not shut these two characters up — that’s very hard to do — but it should at least give them some pause. And it’s not as if they themselves haven’t made a lot of dubious philosophical assumptions in order to get where they end up.”

So the question is: Do these extra chapters of *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book One, accomplish what Father Thomas Joseph wants them to? I can’t say for sure. This is dense material, and I have to think about the matter some more. But I’m fairly certain that they make an impressive beginning of it.

2. *The Chapter on Rahner*

Now to the chapter on Rahner. Let me say, to begin with, that this chapter is an excellent piece of work. Rahner’s relevant positions — and Joseph Marechal’s before him — are laid out with great care and utter fairness. The criticisms of Rahner — some peculiar to the author and others drawn from the likes of von Balthasar, Di Noia, Knasas, and Bradley — are succinct and, to my mind, convincing. So what’s there left for me to do?

I had wanted to do two things, only one of which I will in fact do. That will be to argue that by reflecting on St. Thomas’s attitude toward the claim that God’s existence is known *per se*, we can make the argument of this chapter both clearer and more cogent. The second thing I had planned to do was to draw some lessons for the future from the phenomenon of Transcendental Thomism. But [Fr. Thomas Joseph’s presentation today](#) does as good a job of laying out our present situation as I could have hoped to, and then some. So in this regard I will simply satisfy myself with contributing to the general discussion about the future course of Thomism that I’m sure his remarks will spark.

One important aspect of Rahner’s project is to show that God as unlimited and absolute *esse* is grasped by every human subject at the horizon, as it were, of our intellective understanding of and judgments about material being. The conviction that we have this sort of “pre-apprehensive grasp” of God leads Rahner to re-shape St. Thomas’s account of the active intellect’s role in the formation of quidditative, i.e., natural kind, concepts. Remarkably, what we get is concept formation by negating and limiting in various ways the unlimited perfection of absolute *esse* that we begin by grasping in an ‘unthematized’ way. So all of our judgments about material substances and their properties presuppose an awareness of unlimited perfection and of the fact that such substances fall short of that perfection in various ways.

There is much to say here. Notice, first, the echoes of the argument in the *Phaedo* that our judgments about inequality presuppose what we might justly call a “pre-apprehensive” grasp of perfect equality; or of Descartes’s claim in the Third Meditation that “the perception of the infinite somehow exists in me prior to the perception of the finite.” Malebranche’s Augustinianism looms prominently in the background as well. Indeed, in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* St. Thomas himself considers a similar argument for the claim that God’s existence is known *per se*: “Just as the sun’s light is a principle of every perception of the visible, so God’s light (*lux*) is a principle of every cognition of the intelligible, since it is in this light that one finds the first and maximally intelligible light-source (*lumen*). Therefore,

it must be known *per se* that there is a God.” (For the record, St. Thomas’s response is this: “God is, to be sure, that by which all things are known — yet not in the sense that other things are known only if He Himself is known, as happens in the case of principles that are known *per se*, but rather in the sense that all cognition is caused in us by His influence.”)

Thus, what Rahner offers us is something like easy epistemic access to the being of God, but only *via remotionis*, as it were, for our cognition of finite material things — just the opposite of what we find in St. Thomas’s own natural theology.

This inversion is, of course, precisely what animates Fr. Thomas Joseph, who complains that Rahner is here relying exclusively on an analogy between God and creatures that is *multa ad unum*, where the *unum* is *being in general*, and the *multa* are, as it were, *infinite being* and *finite being*. Now I must admit to being one of those whose eyes begin to glaze over when I am exposed to the competing claims about St. Thomas on analogy. And I must confess, as much as I love Fr. Thomas Joseph’s book, I often found his discussions of analogy, some in the text and some in the footnotes, a bit hazy and confusing. It’s partly my own fault, I am sure, but I think that he bears some responsibility as well.

However, the good news (for me, at least) is that we can just as easily give a Thomistic critique of Rahner without even mentioning analogy, except perhaps as something concomitant with what, from St. Thomas’s perspective, is the *real* problem, viz., the inability of any natural theology that begins with the claim that God is known *per se* (or *a priori*) to deliver a metaphysical account of God’s transcendence and ‘other-ness’ that is rich enough and meaty enough to cure us once and for all of the pagan tendency toward anthropomorphism.

To be sure, St. Thomas does indeed in the end describe God as *esse* unlimited to any genus or species, and he does indeed hold that participation by creatures in *esse* is marked by a contraction of the sum of all perfections to some specific and proper subset of perfections. However, in St. Thomas’s natural theology this portrait of God as Unparticipated *Esse* — a Platonic limiting notion complemented in a very interesting way by the Aristotelian limiting notion of Pure Actuality — is a philosophical achievement and most assuredly not a starting point. What’s more, its being a philosophical achievement is absolutely crucial if we are to have anything like a less than misleading natural understanding of the divine nature. For it comes after a causal proof of a preeminent being and as the culmination of the *via remotionis*; and it is, St. Thomas thinks, only through a rich and thick *via remotionis* that we can come to a deep appreciation of God’s transcendence. Once we have removed from God every specification of the act/potency duality found in finite creatures — from form/matter to nature/subject to difference/genus to accident/substance to *esse/essentia* — we won’t be tempted to think of God as ‘one of the guys’, so to speak. God will instead be totally weird, as it were. (A nice byproduct, by the way, is that the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation will be appreciated as even more startling and outlandish and wondrous than it seemed before.)

What’s more, our attribution of positive perfections to God will take place only under the ‘cloud’, so to speak, of the *via remotionis*. This is the point at which analogy of the right sort becomes relevant and important, but notice that its importance is parasitic on the centrality of the *via remotionis*.

By contrast, a natural theology built on the claim that the existence of a perfect being is known *per se* or *a priori* is such that it wholly bypasses the *via remotionis* and reaches divine perfection without the necessary ‘purification’, as it were. (It’s a bit like trying to become holy without any practice of asceticism or mortification.)

I suspect that St. Thomas became more and more insistent on this point as he got older. My evidence for this is that in his later treatments (in the two *Summas*) of the claim that God's existence is known *per se* he does not even mention St. Anselm by name, a breach of his normal standards of philosophical decorum. Allow me a bit of speculation here; I think that by that time St. Thomas had become a bit embarrassed for Anselm on this issue. I say this despite the fact that, from my perspective, St. Thomas's reply to Anselm's so-called ontological argument is less than satisfactory. I have tried many times to interpret what he says in a way that does not beg the question against Anselm, and I have never quite succeeded to my own satisfaction. But in the end I don't think it matters. I think that St. Thomas's view is that even if an argument like Anselm's or one of the other *a priori* arguments worked, it would *still* not be a fitting foundational first step for natural theology. Not only that, but it would be downright *dangerous* to take it as such a foundation.

So we Thomists don't need to rely on Kant or Heidegger for an attack on 'onto-theology' — so long as onto-theology includes as an essential element what St. Thomas means by the position that God's existence is known *per se*. St. Thomas had already taken care of that a long time ago.

I think that the general thrust of my comment is wholly consonant with the spirit and letter of Fr. Thomas Joseph's chapter. It's just that, for me at any rate, this re-thinking of the chapter made my uneasiness with Rahner's project a bit clearer.