

Introduction

The history of theology has left us no small number of examples of intellectual genius coupled with remarkable industry attesting to that genius. Even among such a rich company, however, the contribution of Hans Urs von Balthasar stands out. Not only the amount of text he produced (as writer, compiler, and editor), but also the scope of topics and literature that he ranges over set him apart as one of the most learned and daunting theologians of any time.

This is, of course, at one level, a scholar's dream. von Balthasar has left us an enormous playground on which to chart our own concerns and values, and in which to find the room for our analytical speculations (whether faithful or "interpretive") to roam. It is therefore paramount that any scholarly reflection on von Balthasar define in the clearest possible terms what its own nature is to be: what type of study is it, what relationship does it intend to have with the original Balthasarian material, what topics are central and what peripheral to its aims?

In this chapter I intend to introduce, as specifically as possible, the nature of the current project, and to situate it within the web of issues relating to the interpretation of von Balthasar. In order to do so, this chapter will also have to mark several issues and themes in von Balthasar which themselves have exercised a controlling influence on the shape of this project, and which must to some extent be taken into account in any reflection on von Balthasar that seeks to be analytical rather than constructive (which is the type of project this one is). This includes some reflection on von Balthasar's sources and influences as well as on the issues involved in interpreting von Balthasar across different genres (most notably, his historical vs. his constructive works).

I. THEOLOGY'S HANDMAID

Von Balthasar is a theologian, and, in spite of the attraction he offers to those in other fields of study, he is of primary interest to theologians. It is my ultimate

desire to interpret von Balthasar theologically in light of the most central and pressing claims of Christian theology: the Trinity, Christology, and grace. However, the specificity of his theology in these loci is difficult to demonstrate apart from the nest of assumptions, commitments, and conclusions that inform even the meaning of such basic words as *love*. In the case of many theologians, the explication of these philosophical issues can form an introductory chapter to the theological analysis proper. However, in von Balthasar's case, sustained reflection on the philosophical themes which are evident throughout his works is necessary if we are to avoid interpreting him in light of someone else; for he has labored hard (if not precisely or concisely) to specify a conceptual language that is to be deployed in the explication of the theology. We cannot learn this language from anyone other than von Balthasar, because it is *his* language. As a language, it is not without antecedents or analogues, but it is nevertheless *sui generis*.

Accordingly, the ultimate theological horizon of Trinity, Christology, and grace has to be deferred until a later study. The current study, which will serve as necessary preparation for the other, will occupy itself with the explication of von Balthasar's metaphysics. However, it is important to realize that any attempt to defer theological questions to the subsequent study would deeply caricature von Balthasar's thought, which sees a deep connection between the two.¹ Metaphysics can only be discussed in conversation with theology.

Terms like *metaphysics* and *theology* have been used and misused so frequently that one often wonders if the concept the speaker and the hearers have of these words are at all similar. So what do I mean by *metaphysics*, and what do I mean by *theology*?

A. WHAT IS METAPHYSICS?

Metaphysics is the philosophy of first principles. It includes under itself ontology and epistemology. Therefore, all ontological and epistemological questions are *de facto* also metaphysical questions. However, metaphysics is not simply co-extensive with the conjunction of ontology and epistemology, but has its own questions. What are these? If all ontological and epistemological questions are set aside as included within metaphysics broadly speaking but not part of metaphysics proper, what is left?

One answer to the question is logic. Logic is neither ontology nor epistemology: it is the rules by which we judge thinking to be correct, the formal principles that guide our whole process of thinking and reflecting on the

world. Is logic then co-extensive with metaphysics? Or is it something other than and prior to metaphysics?

The identification of logic with metaphysics would be a reduction, and an unwarranted one. For while in actual practice logic has the upper hand on metaphysics (as can be seen from the fact that at the very beginning of metaphysical reflection, logic is already at work controlling what can and cannot be said), this is more a methodological priority than a “logical” one. For logic, closely examined, will be found to depend upon certain claims about the way the world is, and so is founded upon a certain ontology. Or, if it is not founded on “beings” or “Being” but on some other dynamic in the world, even if it is taken to simply be a description of the fundamental structures of rationality, logic is still founded upon something which itself belongs properly to the field of metaphysics.² For this reason, von Balthasar’s use of the word *logic* in the Triptych³ is largely a way of referencing *metaphysics*.⁴

If logic also is a part of metaphysics with its own proper content distinct from ontology and epistemology, is anything left to belong to metaphysics proper? Yes: what is left are questions of the structures that obtain between beings, or between different modes of knowledge. That is to say, the conditions of the possibility of being and knowledge, causality as such (which may require being but is itself no part of the field of being, nor is a robust understanding of beings obviously sufficient to ground a robust understanding of causality). Ontology thus seems to be not all questions whatever about being, but the study of the nature of being; *whether* there is a being and *which* beings there are seems to belong more properly to metaphysics than to ontology.

Thus, the fundamental questions of metaphysics are: “Why is there something rather than nothing?” “What accounts for the fact that there are many things and not just one thing?” “What types of things are there?” “What types of causality are there?” “What is the nature of causality considered generally, and in its particular types?” “What is necessary and what is contingent?” There are of course more.⁵ But this should serve to give some sense of what I mean by metaphysics. It is these properly metaphysical questions that are my focus in the following pages, precisely because such questions are deeply informed by and have deep significance for theological questions.

However, there is a certain passage from *My Work in Retrospect* in which it seems that von Balthasar wishes to distance himself from metaphysics. What he is really concerned with, he says there, is *meta-anthropology*: “It is here that the substance of my thought inserts itself. Let us say above all that the traditional term ‘metaphysical’ signified the act of transcending physics, which for the Greeks signified the totality of the cosmos, of which man was a part. For us

physics is something else: the science of the material world. For us the cosmos perfects itself in man, who at the same time sums up the world and surpasses it. Thus our philosophy will be essentially a meta-anthropology, presupposing not only the cosmological sciences, but also the anthropological sciences, and surpassing them toward the question of the being and essence of man” (*My Work in Retrospect*, 114). This seeming challenge to considering von Balthasar’s philosophy under the heading “metaphysics” doesn’t actually say as much as it seems to. What von Balthasar has offered here is an attempt to shut down the possibility of moderns taking the anthropological dimension as subsequent to or excluded from the basic philosophical question. His point is that the microcosm is found in humanity, and so humanity isn’t defined over and against an impersonal metaphysical backdrop, but is right at the heart of it.⁶ We catch already a hint of the distinctive note von Balthasar will sound, that *personhood* will play a much larger role in metaphysics than is traditional. But at the end of the day, this is not an argument for meta-anthropology instead of metaphysics, but simply for a certain broadening (or resistance to the shrinking) of the *scope* of metaphysics.

B. WHAT IS THEOLOGY?

What is theology, then? Theology is that discourse which is primarily concerned with the proper conceptualization and articulation, as far as it is humanly possible, of truths about God. Theology is not anthropology, or physics, or literature, yet it will deliver much that is true which will drastically alter the reflections of all other disciplines. Thus, if we know that God is of such a sort (Creator, good, worthy of worship), we will also know a lot about humanity. Or better, we will have to exclude certain theses about humanity (our self-sufficiency, for instance).

Thus, the central theological topics are the Trinity (who and how God is in Godself), Christology (the identity of God in a person who willed not to exclude but rather to include creation in himself, and the work of God in recovering lost humanity for Godself), and grace (the general and specific character of God’s actions toward those beings to whom God owes nothing). From these midpoints, theology will expand to include a doctrine of creation (including angelology, demonology, anthropology, and theology of nature), a theology of history, and other such things. But it does not thereby *become* history, or the natural sciences, precisely because these disciplines study their objects in themselves, while theology looks at such things in their relation to God. True, it is a claim of theology that its view is a privileged one, that it sees

things most clearly; but more premises would be required to reach the further conclusion that this in any way impinges upon the dignity and value of the sciences and humanities in their own right.

C. THE RELATION OF METAPHYSICS AND THEOLOGY

If metaphysics and theology are understood as I have said here, then it becomes clear that a strong separation between them is not really possible. Metaphysics lies “exposed” to theology both because it receives fundamental information which it is not privileged to question from theology (if the metaphysician is also one committed to the truth of Christian theological claims) and because it must hold itself ready to be judged, and, if necessary, corrected at all times by theology. Its proper space of exercise is the identification, proper distinction, and clarification of conceptuality that will enable theology to speak more accurately and authentically, to more fully and coherently translate its divine message into human terms. These ways taken together define metaphysics in its role as the handmaid of theology.

This dynamic, as with theology’s relations to the other fields of human knowledge, does not take away from the proper exercise of metaphysics, or its right to work in its proper field; it does, however, point the work of metaphysics toward theology, and precisely when it is to be used by a theologian: “Thus we may conclude that the whole unabridged metaphysics of the transcendentals of Being can only be unfolded under the theological light of the creation of the world in the Word of God, who expresses himself in divine freedoms as a sensate-spiritual man. But in asserting this, we do so without implying that metaphysics itself needs to become theology” (*Epilogue* 78).⁷ This is important for understanding the notion of the relationship between theology and metaphysics as von Balthasar sees it. He has a fundamental commitment to the idea that reality is only the way it is because God is the way God is (thus, God is not self-identical because the law of non-contradiction requires it, rather the law of non-contradiction itself holds because God is self-identical). This is in effect to refuse to submit God to any outside standard, but rather to make God the determiner of every standard. This means that the immanent (Trinitarian) being of God as such is the ground of metaphysics.

That this is true places metaphysics in a necessary relation to theology. For in taking the being of God as the first principle of metaphysics, one in fact asserts that the immanent being of God is as such beyond the bounds of metaphysics as a ground that conditions but is not conditioned by the dependent system. Before creation, there is no metaphysics at all, just God and

the all-sufficiency of the divine essence. Only once there is creation are there implications of that essence which are more than merely hypothetical, and thus metaphysics proper. Only creation is subject to metaphysics, and at the head of creation stands not merely the divine essence, not even the Trinitarian God, but the archetypal Son in imitation of whom creation obeys the rules of the being of God.

Metaphysics, therefore, while the height of philosophy, stops short of theology. In other words, philosophy takes creation for its object, theology takes God for its object. The incarnation is therefore the most significant event in the life of the relationship of these two disciplines, and on that analogy philosophy is not destroyed by theology, but perfected by it (*gratia non destruit, sed perficit naturam*).

It is this relationship that also gives metaphysics a sort of priority, as von Balthasar expresses at the beginning of the *Theologic*: “By its very nature, theological insight into God’s glory, goodness, and truth presupposes an *ontological*, and not merely formal or gnoseological, infrastructure of worldly being. Without philosophy, there can be no theology” (*TL I.7*). Or again, “In order to be a serious theologian, one must also, indeed, first, be a philosopher; one must—precisely also in the light of revelation—have immersed oneself in the mysterious structures of creaturely being (and the ‘simple’ can do this just as well as, and presumably better than, the ‘wise and understanding’” [Mt. 11:25]) (*TL I.8*). Von Balthasar goes on to discuss the nature of the philosophical problem of worldly being as the theologian will encounter it; ultimately it issues in the question of the way in which finite being is an “image and likeness” of absolute being. He concludes: “But this question becomes meaningful, indeed, urgent, only insofar as our horizon is theological and trinitarian” (*TL I.11*).

Thus it is clear that metaphysics cannot get “puffed up”; in order to understand itself properly it will have to look beyond itself: “Creaturely logic can only have a correct estimate of itself if it sees itself as participating analogously in an absolute Logos that traces its origin backward to the Father and forward to the Spirit of freely given love who pours forth from him and from him who is his source. Formal creaturely logic, too, is grounded in the Trinity and molded by it” (*TD V.65*). The reciprocal dynamic of philosophy and theology, where each claims its own sort of primacy, may thus be summed up for von Balthasar by reference to Klaus Hemmerle: “If mankind is to understand God’s word that is uttered to the world, philosophy is presupposed; conversely, this means that man’s finite reason must exhibit and openness beyond itself if it is to be receptive to the divine speech” (*TD V.73*). He calls this a “reciprocal a priori of philosophy and theology.”⁸

Given that this is so, I will not try to bracket theology to such an extent that it is not an integral part of the discussion: this would violate the entire schema presented here, to which von Balthasar is deeply committed. Nor will this bracketing show up most properly in the bracketing of topics discussed (for our analysis reaches fulfillment in a consideration of the Trinity and Christology). Rather, theology will be bracketed in the sense that some ideas will not have their full explication here, because the final dimension of all topics is their explication as it is found in God, which crosses the threshold from metaphysics to theology. It is simply true for von Balthasar that everything in the metaphysics could be transposed into the theological realm, and that in fact, properly understood, metaphysics is just a transposition into the creaturely realm of what is properly theological. This is the boundary we shall constantly resist crossing, from the metaphysical to its theological transposition. As a result of this, the discussion presented here may be thought to suffer in places from incompleteness: something important has been left out, or something has not been discussed with the depth it could have been. It is my hope that such thoughts will only arise precisely at those places where the deeper explication of the topic in question would require a more explicit and rigorous theological analysis. Such analyses will have to wait for a later study that will complement and expand upon this current volume.

Consider an example from von Balthasar's book on Maximus the Confessor, *Cosmic Liturgy*:⁹ "It would be an anachronism, in dealing with a thinker like Maximus (or with any patristic or early Scholastic writer), to try to make a distinction between philosophy and theology when the subject is a thoughtful interpretation of God and the world and their relationship to each other, as if to suggest that trinitarian issues are not connected to the purely philosophical problem of positive and negative theology. The fact that Maximus grounds both the natural law and the positive moral teaching of the old covenant in Jesus Christ, as Word-to-be-made-flesh, excludes such an approach, as does the way he always considers all the "philosophical" problems of the emergence and return of the world exclusively within the concrete, supernaturally grounded order of sin and redemption" (*CL* 100). To the extent that this is also true about von Balthasar, it could be read as a serious criticism of the current project. This project should, the criticism would say, treat metaphysics and theology together; the attempt to separate them only introduces caricature. This objection is not Balthasarian, however: he has no problem treating metaphysics separately, as is shown by *Theologic* I.¹⁰ What this passage does delineate are the reasons the boundaries between the philosophical and theological projects will not be drawn with strict lines. This is not

metaphysics with theology bracketed, not even to the extent that *Theologic I* is; it is an explication of a metaphysics which must not only always be open to theology but will actually always be inviting theology in to precisely the extent that the metaphysics is conditioned by the theology.

As to its own nature, therefore, this study does not properly belong to the discipline of philosophy, because its treatment of von Balthasar's metaphysics always treats it in the realm of and with an eye to theology. My goal here is to present the metaphysics precisely as an introduction to a serious study of his theology. In spite of the focus on philosophical themes, this work remains a work of philosophical theology.

D. SACRED METAPHYSICS

Von Balthasar's statements about not just the mutual *a priori* of theology and metaphysics, but also the necessity that a theologian also be a metaphysician and that all metaphysics in fact understand itself theologically, leads to a further question: to what extent is it possible to talk about a "sacred metaphysics?" What I mean by "sacred metaphysics" is a metaphysical system that is internally marked as being Christian. Thus, it is not simply a metaphysical system that has been influenced by Christianity, nor one that is hospitable to Christian claims; rather, it is one that has been thought through from the first moments of its reflection in the light of Christian truth claims. Such doctrinal claims would form an integral part of the material that is taken as given by the system: while it may be confirmed by later deduction, it is foundational to such an extent that it is never really in question. Can von Balthasar allow for such a conception?

It seems to me that not only can he allow such a conception, but also that only such a conception can really satisfy the demands he has placed, to the point of near polarity, on these two disciplines. Further, not only can he allow such a conception, he must, at least in part, be involved in the effort of trying to construct such a sacred metaphysics; partly in order to be consistent with his own claims about the role of metaphysics in theology, and partly because of his strong exemplarism. To think that he, as one who has faith in Christ, could attempt a metaphysic that would not be sacred, given his understanding of Christ's role in creation, would be ridiculous.¹¹

As an example, let us take another passage from *Cosmic Liturgy*. There he describes Maximus as placing his metaphysics in the light of a *Biblical* synthesis. Metaphysical reflection has the job of explicating the positivity of creation as other than God so that it is strengthened against all attempts to dissolve it back into the divine (a tendency von Balthasar feels that Maximus, as an

Eastern theologian, would above all have to face).¹² von Balthasar concludes that: “Only such a metaphysic lays a foundation deep enough to bear an all-inclusive synthesis and strong enough to let different elements of Eastern spirituality be added to the structure without endangering either its cohesion or its meaning” (*CL* 55). But a careful reading of the sort of metaphysics he has claimed Maximus has won reveals that it is one that, by thinking through the implications of Monophysitism and Monotheletism, the assumptions of Origenism, and the entire Platonic prejudice against created reality, has become a sacred metaphysic. That this is how he reads the development of Maximus’s thought becomes clear a few pages later, when discussing Chalcedon: “These texts are enough to give us a notion of the way the Christological formula [of Chalcedon] expands, for Maximus, into a fundamental law of metaphysics” (*CL* 70). This is a clear example of metaphysics based on material delivered as a given by theology: what I am calling sacred metaphysics.

On the other hand, any claim that von Balthasar is self-consciously attempting to construct a sacred metaphysics must deal with his relation to his previous sources, particularly his dependence on Plato, Aristotle (through Aquinas), Hegel, and Heidegger. These sources will be discussed individually later;¹³ what is relevant here is that if von Balthasar is constructing a sacred metaphysics, it is not a project that attempts to start from the beginning, to rethink for itself all that must be thought. Rather, in accordance with his principle that a theory shows its power by its ability to include other theories in itself,¹⁴ he will attempt to incorporate what he believes to be the genuine insights of other metaphysical systems. He is further enabled in this by what he considers the Christian response to the reality that “the supernatural has impregnated nature so deeply that there is simply no way to reconstruct it [nature] in its pure state (*natura pura*),” namely, to “acknowledge and accept the indelible presence of such theologoumena at the heart of concrete philosophical thinking” (*TL* I.12).

This allows us to recognize that the distinction between a sacred and a secular metaphysics is not going to be so very significant for von Balthasar, precisely because of his exemplarism. For if Christ stands at the head of the world as its exemplar, then the difference between a sacred and a secular metaphysics is reduced to whether or not a) the creatureliness of all things is recognized and b) the relation of those things, if they are seen as creatures, is seen in light of their origin. This does not mean that all metaphysics are in some way sacred; the failure to reflect on these two themes is a deep failure that will place a limit on how accurate the system can be.

However, since von Balthasar does not exclude these things, however much he may borrow from secular sources, this project is an attempt at sacred metaphysics of a sort. I say “of a sort” because it seems to me that serious questions remain about the extent of any possible isomorphism between a metaphysics that is secular in this sense and a properly sacred use of it. Isn’t it just possible that there remains a character that is stamped upon every individual proposition in the metaphysics (which is always understood in the web of its relations to the rest of the system) that at least makes it very difficult to extricate the proposition and migrate it into a new setting? Perhaps it is as hard for philosophical propositions to change systems as it is for Aristotelian accidents to change subjects.

II. NEVER-CEASING FOUNTAIN: VON BALTHASAR’S SOURCES

I mentioned in the previous section von Balthasar’s use of prior philosophical systems. It is important to reflect on the general character of his relations to his sources and on the nature of his relationship to some of his most important sources.

What strikes the reader who ranges widely across von Balthasar’s corpus is the inconsistency of evaluation of sources. A particular figure may be treated quite sympathetically in one place and quite negatively in another. Plotinus, for example, receives a positive evaluation in *The Glory of the Lord* IV,¹⁵ but virtually everywhere else in the Triptych he is mentioned negatively, almost to the point of villainization. On the reverse end, Bonaventure, whom I will argue is the most important of all of von Balthasar’s sources, is praised and depended upon universally through the Triptych, except for *Theologic* III, where his understanding of the Trinity must be firmly denied in favor of von Balthasar’s developing Spirit-Christology.

The reason for this inconsistency is not difficult to identify: von Balthasar will at some point attempt to retrieve something valuable from everyone he has read, and at such times a positive evaluation is the inevitable result. But he also must be clear when he is distancing himself from others so that his own voice may be heard.

In itself, there is nothing unusual about this. What is peculiar to von Balthasar is that he does not try to balance his accounts. Many other writers, when praising an aspect of a thinker they largely disagree with, will qualify their praise so that it is clear that their overall evaluation is negative, even if there is something positive that deserves special consideration. Von Balthasar by contrast will indulge in unfettered praise, even though he really only likes one

very small thing, and otherwise thinks the author quite pernicious or bankrupt. Likewise, when he offers criticism, it is not typically mitigated by what may in fact be an overall positive estimation. This means that one must attend to a particular figure's fate over the whole of the Balthasarian corpus and not merely in particular spots, or one risks getting exactly the wrong impression of von Balthasar's feelings about that figure.

There is also another type of interaction with his sources in which von Balthasar punctuates his own text with the words of others, as if all he has been saying is merely a gloss of what they had said. *Theologic I*, for example, is filled with references (especially to Aquinas) in which von Balthasar cites the original formulation in support of an idea he has just presented.

For example, he says: "Being coincides with consciousness and self-consciousness, thus becoming its own object. This is the true meaning of the *cogito ergo sum*" (TL I.93). It is very unlikely that this, as von Balthasar means it, is what Descartes meant. Often in such cases, the Balthasarian claim that is getting summarized by these quotes (often signaled as quotes because they have been left in their original language by the translator) are, in actual point of fact, *not* the same as the idea that is being referenced.

This seems strange at first: why so much desire to read his philosophy back into the great thinkers of the western intellectual tradition? The answer is one we have already encountered: it is precisely because he believes that the best way to replace a system of thought is by showing that its insights have already been included, but with a broader vista, in the new system of thought. He wants us to see, for example, that his understanding of the reciprocity of activity and passivity in the intellect is a fuller and deeper understanding of what Aquinas was after with the Aristotelian concepts of active and passive intellect; he wants us to understand that subject-object mutual interpenetration is what makes best sense of the Aristotelian claim that the intellect is in a certain way all things.

It is therefore to some extent a rhetorical strategy. But, it is worth asking to what extent this may be read as *merely* a rhetorical strategy, that is to say, whether at the end of the day it turns out that there is not actually any correspondence between von Balthasar's view and that of his source. To affirm this would be, I think, too facile. Von Balthasar seems to believe that there is substantive agreement and not merely cosmetic agreement, and our interpretations must start from that premise. Of course, we may still decide after careful consideration that only a distorted reading of Aquinas would allow von Balthasar to conclude that there is concord: that would have to be determined on a case by case basis.

We turn, thus, to a brief consideration of some of von Balthasar's specific sources. Von Balthasar is notoriously well read; to go into all of his sources, even in brief detail, would require a lengthy study of its own and more erudition than most of us can claim. I intend only to point out the sources which are most important for the development of his metaphysics. This shrinks the field down to Plato, Aquinas, Hegel, Heidegger, and Bonaventure. Of course, the make-up of the list can itself be disputed; such dispute would in fact be a substantive disagreement with the interpretive reading offered here. Even in that case, however, I think the figures chosen have to appear on any list of von Balthasar's most important sources of his philosophical thought; whether they suffice or not, they must surely be recognized.

A. PLATO AND THE QUESTION OF PLATONISM

Von Balthasar maintains throughout his works a sharp distinction between Neo-Platonism and Platonism. The two are not the same, and he is most certainly a Platonist and not a Neo-Platonist. Yet, he is aware that there is sufficient confusion about what the distinction between these two might be that his works would run the risk of getting him classified as a Neo-Platonist.¹⁶ What is the difference?

Briefly (the difference will be discussed at more length later),¹⁷ Platonism parses the relationship between God and the world with analogy, while Neo-Platonism parses it with identity. Neo-Platonism is therefore, in his view, some form of pantheism. Thus he can refer casually to the "pantheistic dress of Neo-Platonism" (*CL* 29).

Von Balthasar's relation to Platonism, on the other hand, is one of the most undeniable of his philosophical influences. The very conception of the Triptych rests upon a positive valuation of the Platonic understanding of being as qualified by transcendental properties. Further, participation plays an important role in his metaphysics, and this is a favorite theme of Platonists. Other Platonic intuitions are clearly present, including certain notions about mediation and the nature of causality (as expressed in the exemplarity borrowed from Bonaventure).

In spite of this, there are also some very important ways in which von Balthasar will want to distance himself from Plato and Platonism, even going so far as embracing an Aristotelian view instead. There are two specific disagreements with Plato: the first is concerning the positivity of the non-ideal world, and the second is concerning the ideal world itself.

Plato's valuation of the world of ideas is such that it reduces our world to a world of shadows, a lack of reality; it is the realm of becoming, and as such it is unstable and insecure. It is the result of a fall: in truth, we belong with the gods, contemplating the forms, and we have fallen into these bodies as tombs due to our inattention. This is, for von Balthasar, unacceptable. Part of the reason is Christological: the fact of the Incarnation tells a different story about not just corporeality but also historicity. But beyond this, more fundamentally, the problem turns out to be trinitarian in nature. Because Plato has not understood the Trinity, he has not been able to find a way to affirm that the other, even the non-divine other, is good in itself.¹⁸

All positivity has migrated to the ideal world, the world of forms. This too comes in for strong critique by von Balthasar. It is, in fact, the most consistently critiqued Platonic notion. The specifics of this critique will be covered later;¹⁹ for now, it is enough to note that this is the point where von Balthasar thinks we must follow Aristotle rather than Plato.

These two claims are of course no small part of Platonism; von Balthasar's disagreement with them constitute a serious departure from the Platonic program. Thus, while the influence of Platonism on von Balthasar's thought is fundamental and undeniable, he must at best be considered a modified Platonist. The term cannot be applied to him without serious qualification.

B. AQUINAS

Aquinas is a major player in von Balthasar's thought. He dominates the first volume of the *Theologic*, and makes a good showing at the opening of the second volume before getting drawn into a conflict with Bonaventure (*TL* II.161–70) from which Bonaventure ultimately emerges victorious (*TL* II.174 ff.). There is thus no shortage of literature on the importance of Aquinas to von Balthasar's project.²⁰

Yet it is undeniable that Aquinas does in the end get superseded. The final evaluation of him is not as negative as that given to Plotinus or even Plato, but there is a palpable sense of disappointment in the treatment afforded him in *The Glory of the Lord*: "Beauty is seldom a central concern for Saint Thomas Aquinas, and for the most part his discussion is dependent on material presented to him by tradition. He calmly reviews this inherited material and tries to harmonize the elements that pour in upon him from Augustine, Denys, Aristotle, Boethius, and his master, Albert, without, so it would seem, making an original contribution of his own to aesthetics in the strict sense" (*GL* IV.393). The disappointment is obviously relative to the particular concern of the

beautiful in the realm of theology: von Balthasar is critiquing Aquinas for not seeing its importance. Is this then why von Balthasar is not more of a Thomist? Hardly; von Balthasar will go on to say that it only *seems* that Aquinas has not made an original contribution. His actual contribution is his understanding of the real distinction between essence and existence, which will transform all subsequent thought about beauty.

The real distinction is, to von Balthasar's mind, the greatest Thomistic achievement. He praises Maximus for anticipating it,²¹ and it is the main reason Aquinas gets pride of place in *Theologic I*. The role of this distinction in von Balthasar's thought will become apparent in what follows; but it rescues Aquinas from what otherwise may well have been a bored dismissal.²²

In spite of this significant accomplishment, Aquinas is constantly playing second fiddle to Bonaventure in the Triptych. In some ways, it is because Aquinas is not enough of a Platonist.²³ But ultimately, it all comes down to the disagreement between Aquinas and Bonaventure over the choice of the formal object of theology: for Aquinas, it is God, while for Bonaventure, it is Christ.²⁴ This is decisive: von Balthasar's Christocentrism and exemplarism mean that it must be Christ who stands atop the system. This difference between Aquinas and Bonaventure colors their relative understandings of the analogy of being, which is of prime concern for von Balthasar; this means that Aquinas's doctrine of the analogy of being will not be sufficient for von Balthasar's purposes.²⁵

Lastly, Aquinas does not escape the suspicion of semi-nominalism, the idea that the divine essence is something which lies behind the divine persons.²⁶ This is a suspicion that is much harder to pin on Bonaventure.²⁷ If the formal object of theology is God and not specifically Christ, the door is not so thoroughly shut on semi-nominalism as von Balthasar would wish.

C. HEGEL

Von Balthasar's relationship with Hegel is, if anything, even more complicated than his relation to Aquinas. On the one hand, Hegel is an example of the entire Neo-Platonic stream that von Balthasar not only criticizes, but from which he must take care to distinguish himself. He is most likely to be misunderstood to be one of them, and so he must give special attention to show how this is not the case. Hegel is, in fact, the highest exemplar of this stream, the true successor to Plotinus, and so is to be harshly criticized.

On the other hand, Hegel has deeply shaped von Balthasar's understanding of freedom, and there are many other Hegelian marks on the Balthasian

system. Von Balthasar will in fact speak of the “enormous harvest” of German idealism,²⁸ and it is particularly Hegel who heads this stream.

This is a sensitive point in the evaluation of von Balthasar’s achievement. A deep theological analysis would be required to show the pivotal role that freedom plays in von Balthasar’s system; yet already here in the present study of the metaphysics we will see that freedom is a significant feature that does a lot of systemic work. But the understanding of freedom that von Balthasar applies is one that owes much to Hegel. This means that a large amount of reasoning power is given over to Hegel by transitivity, and more of von Balthasar’s system than would at first appear stands or falls with a positive valuation of Hegel’s notion of *Geist*.

Thus, whether positively or negatively, Hegel looms large. He is treated several times at length in the Triptych.²⁹ The complicated relationship appears very clearly in *Theologic* III, when von Balthasar, on his way to constructing what he calls a “Spirit-Christology,” turns to Hegel as one who has done most in this area. Hegel receives a generally sympathetic treatment before being booted out of the realm of true Spirit-Christology. It is particularly Hegel’s understanding of the Spirit that disqualifies him (namely, that it is not personal); but this is really a Christological disagreement at heart: such a person-less Spirit within a philosophical system controlled by the concept of *Geist* shows that personhood, and particularly personhood in Christ, has not yet become the ground of philosophical reflection.

D. HEIDEGGER

There is much less direct interaction with Heidegger than with Hegel. However, there is perhaps no less noticeable a dependence. It is difficult to imagine how the phenomenological analysis of worldly truth in *Theologic* I could be carried out apart from Heidegger’s thought. From the opening assumption of truth as unveiledness to the dynamics of the subject-object structure, Heidegger has left a deep and indelible mark on the Balthasarian edifice.

Unlike Hegel, Heidegger does not receive extended treatments in the Triptych. He is most often recognized from the assumption of his language, though occasionally his name comes forward to quickly move the discussion along. We see him mentioned both positively and negatively in the same breath in the following passage: “Wonder at Being is not only the beginning of thought, but—as Heidegger sees—also the permanent element (ἀρχή) in which it moves. But this means—contrary to Heidegger—that it is not only astonishing

that an existent being can wonder at Being in its own distinction from Being, but also that Being as such by itself to the very end ‘causes wonder,’ behaving as something to be wondered at, something striking and worthy of wonder” (GL V.614–615).

In spite of this strong dependence, the final word on Heidegger taken as a whole is negative. He is ultimately lumped in with Hegel as insufficiently clear on the distinction between God and the world: in other words, he belongs to the Neo-Platonic stream, and so has failed to ground his thinking in a principle of analogy.³⁰ This is also, as we shall see over the course of this study, a Christological failing.³¹

In the end, all of the thinkers mentioned above, in spite of the great influence they have on the final shape of von Balthasar’s thought, fall short. He ultimately takes leave of each one of them, and the underlying reason is always the same: their systems are insufficient to ground a Christology of the sort he desires.

E. BONAVENTURE

That brings us to Bonaventure. Surely it will not be the case that Bonaventure, the most Christocentric theologian of the Scholastic tradition, will be rejected on Christological grounds. And in fact, he is not. It is to a large extent the robust Christology of Bonaventure that gives him pride of place among all of von Balthasar’s sources.

It is difficult to understate the importance of Bonaventure to von Balthasar. Von Balthasar will turn to him again and again, borrowing both conceptuality and language. The conceptuality he borrows is the exemplarity that becomes central to von Balthasar’s own understanding of the analogy of being, the key concept in all of Balthasarian thought. Bonaventure is in fact so key to von Balthasar’s thought that any invocation of him is sure to be a sign of a major moment in the system. So much so that the reader is cued to pay close attention to the idea being developed whenever the name of Bonaventure appears in the text.³²

Bonaventure receives the lion’s share of attention in *The Glory of the Lord* volume 2, where he is offered as the great synthesizer who says better what the other authors in that volume have said: and, as has been mentioned, Aquinas is constantly transcended in the direction of Bonaventure in *Theologic* volume 2. It can be said without hesitation that no substantive mark on the theological vision is deeper than that of Bonaventure. The ways in which this colors the fundamental metaphysical choices will become clear in this study: the version of

the Analogy Thesis von Balthasar adopts, the relation of trinitarian procession to creation (*proportionalitas*), and therefore the idea which is above all Balthasarian, that Christ is the concrete analogy of being. All of this only becomes possible in the light of Bonaventuran commitments.

But even Bonaventure can take von Balthasar only so far. They too ultimately part ways, but not this time over the question of Christology. Instead, it is the Spirit that causes them to separate. Bonaventure's understanding of trinitarian processions is not robust enough to ground the Spirit-Christology of the final volume of *Theologic*, and therefore he too must be dismissed. But he is the last of von Balthasar's sources to go: he has survived longer than any other, and is the clearest antecedent to von Balthasar in the theological tradition.³³

Before leaving this question of von Balthasar's influences, I want to say a word about one of von Balthasar's habits, namely that of making broad, sweeping generalizations or characterizations, like "Asian religion."³⁴ This is of course distasteful to the contemporary scholar. Usually such unfortunate excesses may be corrected by the demonstration that the reality in question is in fact more complex than the author has allowed for, which is usually done by means of reference to more text than the author has examined. But von Balthasar's erudition gives us pause here; whatever we think we might urge against him to show that he is wrong is something he has likely read. We are forced to conclude that these pronouncements do not proceed from ignorance. We may of course still choose to dismiss them as intolerable intellectual vanity, but it is worth at least considering just what von Balthasar thought he was conveying by such claims.

If one stops to look longer in this way, the most charitable conclusion is that such statements are the result of the synthetic process, which sees beneath all things deeper unity and connection than casually appears. In that way and for that reason von Balthasar may not be as wrong as our contemporary tastes might like to hastily conclude. More importantly, such synthetic moments, whatever their adequacy or inadequacy with reference to their objects, tell us an enormous amount about the synthesizer, precisely because he has synthesized in *this* way and not another.

This is important to bear in mind if we are not to bring a series of criticisms to bear on von Balthasar which would be fair if we were to take von Balthasar as attempting to do work in a field not his own, but which are in fact not at all to the point. If the task is to understand von Balthasar, it is only marginally interesting whether or not his reading of Hölderlin gets the poet *right*;³⁵ what is much more important is that von Balthasar thought that *this* type of material could be drawn from *this* type of poet.

III. POINT OF DEPARTURE

We have already spoken of the vast nature of the Balthasarian oeuvre. As a consequence, his legacy is in a somewhat confused state of disarray: no small number of studies of his thought are extant, many of which quite excellently elucidate their chosen theme. Yet among them all, taken singly and collectively, there is a lack of synthesis in evidence. And so we begin to see, as a second stage of scholarly reflections, short guides and primers designed to initiate one into the towering edifice that is von Balthasar's thought.³⁶ There is clearly a need, acknowledged by all, for help in approaching von Balthasar.

The problem is created by von Balthasar himself, and in particular, by two aspects of his work. The first is, as has been noted, a problem of *scope*. Both the amount of material he wrote and the range of topics covered make the bar for entry into a scholarly understanding of his work dauntingly high. But there is a second aspect which complicates our ability to assess and assimilate his works into a scholarly discourse, and that is his method. Not only the way in which he expresses particular ideas, but even the nature of the ideas he discusses and the number of them expresses a certain lack of attention to a proper (or even reasonable) ordering of material. He is far from the first to speak theologically in highly poetic, rhetorical, and metaphorical ways. But he is in very exclusive company in speaking in this way about such blatantly philosophical topics as the problem of universals. The result is that he often speaks in an incomplete or non-precise way about topics that seem by their very nature to require the utmost precision.

This of course has led some to despair of any systemic principle which could be used to organize the disparate material: von Balthasar is simply not a systematic theologian, and must be read in a different way; the result of his work is not a theological system, but a series of interesting studies and reflections, or explorations, and so on.³⁷

It might seem that von Balthasar shared this opinion of his own work, based on the following comment: "All this is what every Christian knows in a spontaneous and unselfconscious way and what he strives to live out. What I am trying to do is to express this in a form in which all the dimensions and tensions of life remain present instead of being sublimated in the abstractions of a 'systematic' theology" (*Retrospect* 98–99). However, to take this in support of the claim that there is no Balthasarian system would be contrary to the whole thrust of the essays that make up *My Work in Retrospect*, which are concerned

to *organize* the enormous material von Balthasar has produced. This desire does not decrease with age but increases, such that in the final reflection (written in 1988, the year of his death), von Balthasar sets himself to the question “what, fundamentally, was I trying to say?” (*Retrospect* 111). He attempts to answer this question by laying out a *post facto* logic of the development of central themes in his thought: this is, in fact, the closest von Balthasar ever got to the type of project I am pursuing here. The enemy in the above passage is thus not a system *per se*, but the type of systematic theology that abstracts from historicity, losing itself in the realms of ideal abstraction.

So, while it is certainly true that von Balthasar’s style of writing and argumentation is not what we would call “systematic,” such that the three volumes of *The Glory of the Lord*, *Theodrama*, and *Theologic* do not constitute a systematic theology, it is a fundamental assumption of my project that these do in fact constitute a theological *system*. It does not follow from the fact that von Balthasar eschewed the systematic approach to presenting and arguing his theology that he therefore also abandoned any desire or intention of unity and completion in the presentation of the theological vision. The very form of the work, spread as it is across three parts, each corresponding to a transcendental property of Being which, taken together, are united in the meta-transcendental unity of the fullness of Being, disallows such a conclusion.

But there is more: one of the reasons why the quest continues for a synthetic reading of the Balthasarian corpus which would at the same time be accessible to the non-specialist is that the experience of reading von Balthasar belies the claim that there is not a unified, coherent vision that is being presented. We are everywhere, from the opening salvos of early works such as *The Cosmic Liturgy* to the closing pages of the *Epilogue* struck by the sense that we have entered into a singular project oriented toward a particular focal point, which ought to be able to lend coherence and structure to the whole once it has been brought into view.

Scholarly attempts to bring this whole into view flounder largely on what turns out to be an organizational principle. Von Balthasar rarely thinks things from their ground to their conclusion, subsequently laying them out in this order for us to see. Rather, he moves organically from topic to topic, and when it is clear that something must be said about the philosophical grounding to establish his argument, he often interrupts himself to do so (or just as often, tells you to look somewhere else in his vast oeuvre for it). Thus, any attempt to construct a synthesis will have to take a wide view of the corpus, but also will have to wander from text to text, reconstructing what is, in effect, the proper logical order of ideas. Such a method can leave one with the suspicion that the

interpreter is picking and choosing passages that suit the argument at hand; the only way to sufficiently assess such claims is by an examination of the passages in their original contexts to see if they really do seem to say what the interpreter claims they are saying.

I have painted a picture of von Balthasar as a synthesizer who has a greater eye on the use to which he can put the work than to the original situation of the work itself. In many ways, comments he has made about others may be understood also about his own project. A few of these are instructive, and perhaps serve as helpful warnings:

How ridiculous those grumblers are, who typecast a Christian thinker with some particular label—for example, Christocentrism—and then stamp as tasteless excess whatever they cannot arrange, in an obvious concentric way, around not simply that theme but the very term itself. The freedom of the mind proves itself not least in one’s unshakable ability to change perspective, to see things at one time from behind, at another from below or from above. It also consists in the possibility of changing one’s mode of expression, of saying the same thing in different ways, and in the ability to take the depths of conceptual perspective into consideration so that one does not always speak on the same level. [. . .] Thinkers of the class of Maximus Confessor are not simply trivial compilers or passive reservoirs; they are creators, who can work, surely, with additional material but who also know how to arrange the pieces according to their own architectural design (*CL* 57).

The following is said of Bonaventure: “At a superficial level he could indeed appear simply to occupy a privileged place of convergence and confluence of all the theological tendencies that from many sources water the mid-thirteenth century and make it fruitful: he could appear as the heart, wide as the world, that offers a place of shelter to each influence, that synthesises them all” (*GL* II.261).

In addition, the following statements, made about Karl Barth’s theology, could also be used to describe von Balthasar’s theology: “Because Christ is the measure of all things, no contradiction between God and the world can break in upon the depths of this compatibility” (*Barth* 114); “now the thought of the incarnation takes over and determines all questions of method” (*ibid.*).

With this last, we arrive at the question that marks the true “point of departure” for von Balthasar, the person of Christ. Von Balthasar’s favorite

metaphor for this privileged position is “midpoint” or “center.”³⁸ Involved in this choice (though who can say which direction the causality flowed) is the importance von Balthasar will place on mediation. Christ, as the one who is the midpoint between God and humanity, not by being partly each and therefore other than each, but rather by being in himself entirely and internally what each of them is, is therefore able to communicate something significant between them. *Communication* here is closer in sense to modern English *transmission*—something of what God is has been given over to humanity, and humanity in its innermost possibilities is lifted up into the Godhead.

This notion of communication bases itself on the fundamental conceptuality of how causality works: participation. Only that which is the midpoint and therefore capable of mediating between two realities is capable of creating a space of participation (*mitteilung*, a sharing along with another in which one is not sharing something extrinsic, as when two children share a toy, but something intrinsic, as when husband and wife share the fullness of who they are). Ultimately, the picture is Platonic;³⁹ and to von Balthasar only such a picture is able to allow sufficient room for the theological claims required about the work and, more importantly, the person of Christ.

These claims can be best seen in concrete form in *A Theology of History*. This book is concerned with the problem of grounding the value of the unique, which is in effect to ask how it is possible to have a robustly positive view of historicity. Philosophy produces an unsolvable problem, namely that it is “philosophically impossible for one human person, who as such is nothing other than one specimen of the human genus or species (the species whose dignity it is that all its members are unique persons)—it is impossible for one such person to be raised to a position of absolute dominance and hence, fundamentally, to become the center point of all persons and their history” (*TH* 13–14). It is a result of this philosophical reflection that we recognize that any path to salvation “could be historical only in an external sense: if it is really to have validity for all, to be a universal and valid way, its basis would have to be in essentiality: the essence of man, of destiny, of the cosmos as a whole” (*TH* 14).

The action of God in the wonder of the Incarnation steps into this philosophical quandary, exploding it from within. Here, a single man is raised to the level of the unique while remaining consubstantial with other humans, our brother. The uniqueness required for his universal validity cannot be such that it endangers the commonality between him and us.⁴⁰ Here is the solution to the quandary: “It is evident that if one of us is existentially one with God’s word in God’s redeeming act, he is thereby, in his uniqueness, raised to become

the norm of our being in the normal of our concrete history, both that of the individual and that of the race” (*TH* 17).

This has, it turns out, direct consequences for metaphysics: it means that metaphysics cannot go on about its business as if this hadn’t happened, nor can it hold itself impervious to the methods of sacred science, remaining aloof in its own independent right to study the one object of metaphysics and theology with the proper tools of metaphysics.⁴¹ Finally, it cannot simply become theology either,⁴² because this would ultimately not respect the integrity of the creaturely and historical realm; it would be the triumph of essentiality over history. There is an incommensurability between theology and every other discipline;⁴³ but because this does not ground the collapsing of all disciplines into theology, it means that every discipline must go to theology to learn its norm. That norm, in all things, is Christ.

This means that von Balthasar is out to construct a system that is metaphysically and theologically Christocentric; it will be, as Barth said of his own *magnum opus*, grounded in “Jesus Christ as its basis, goal and content” (*CD* I.1.6). Therefore, it is Christ as midpoint and first principle that will be the point of departure for the Balthasarian metaphysic. Once this has been seen and taken as a truth by the theologian, it is not possible to simply return to secular metaphysics and take the remaining necessary assumptions from there; from this point forward, every metaphysical assumption, deduction, or utterance of any kind must be re-examined in light of this new norm.

Now, insofar as metaphysics is concerned with first principles, and takes as its point of departure that which is most fundamental, it is worthwhile to consider why it is Christ specifically and not the Trinity that holds the first place. At first glance, the Trinity has a good claim to this place: it is more fundamental than Christ because the fact of Trinity is the condition of the possibility of the person of Christ; the Trinity also contains reference to that person in the Godhead who is related to Christ as origin, and therefore seems to be (at least in the order of logic) more fundamental than Christ. After all, once every specter of subordinationism has been laid to rest, there is still a discernible priority among the persons, which in the Western tradition has run from Father to Son to Holy Spirit. Von Balthasar himself would say that the Trinity is the first “moment” in the life of God—why then is this not chosen as the basis for the metaphysic?

The answer is equally simple and crucial for the right understanding of von Balthasar’s thought: metaphysics is concerned with creation, that is to say, with created realities, and thus its primary reference is to that which is the archetype of all creation. Christ’s archetypal relationship to creation will be considered at

length in the next three chapters; for now, it is enough to assert that it is Christ who is this archetype, and it is in virtue of this that he occupies the central role. The Trinity, properly speaking, is *above* the metaphysic, while at the same time grounding it (to the extent that it grounds the reality of Christ). Thus, though God three-in-one is the most fundamental reality, it is that person who took on created being and is its archetype who stands at the center.⁴⁴

It must be noted at this point that Christ is only distinguished from the Father and the Holy Spirit by virtue of his person—in all else they are not merely equal, but in fact identical. Therefore, if the midpoint of the metaphysic is to be Christ and not the Trinity, we must infer that it can only be as *person* that Christ occupies the central place.⁴⁵

If, therefore, the midpoint or first principle of the metaphysics is a person, it follows that personhood has been placed squarely at the center of the metaphysics. And if the first word in metaphysical discourse is personality, then we are dealing with a metaphysics that is personal in a way that causes it to differ distinctly from the major metaphysical competitors.

This difference between von Balthasar's metaphysic and those he inherits is a point that unfortunately may receive only passing mention here. The results are of fundamental importance, however; for however much there may be a Platonic theology in intimate conversation with the transcendental qualities of being, and whatever room is left for the truly theological dimension after the ontological reductions of Heidegger's later work, the divine as *personal* remains a subsequent interpretive move, whether made by the author or by the reader. For, while one may attempt to identify the Platonic form of the Good with a personal God, the texts themselves are ambiguous and patient of multiple interpretations. Heidegger forces us to work even harder to identify the ontological first principle as it appears in the moment of phenomenological encounter with any sense of personality, and certainly offers no clear and unambiguous claim that such a reality is the first moment of the system.⁴⁶ Even Aristotle, with his emphasis on the particular realities, universalized the particulars, thereby stripping them of their concreteness.⁴⁷ At best, this approach could enshrine personality *as such* in the first place, but never a single, concrete *person*.

However, when, as with von Balthasar, a person becomes the center, then the metaphysics is not just built on personality, but is characterized as *personal*. The immediate advantage is that now the theological reality, an absolute being who is three persons and one God, is not forced to submit to a greater principle in order to make an appearance within the metaphysical realm. No longer are the rules based upon transcendent goodness, to which God must conform at the

risk of imperiling the very fabric of reality. Now it is God, in the Trinitarian specificity of personhood (and therefore *this* divine person and not *that* one), that is the inviolate and inviolable principle of all things. This is a step he saw prepared for him in Maximus: “Still, with the appearance of a new emphasis on existence and person, alongside the classical Greek concern with essence (οὐσία), an important step had been taken in the direction of an ontology of created being” (CL 64). In such a system, because of the unity of their first principles in one person, we will speak not of a *rapprochement* between theology and metaphysics, but rather of a *unity* whose character will turn out to be one, not of identity, but of analogy.

IV. THE ROAD TO BE TRAVELLED: METHODOLOGICAL COMMENTS

Any reading of von Balthasar must despair in its beginning of attaining any sort of comprehensive scope. Even if the entire corpus is able to be brought to bear as subject matter and source, many critical passages will have to go undiscussed due to the simple limits imposed by the unity of a single study. One must embrace this up front, and endeavor to say things that are true and representative such that they will be continually confirmed by further reading, rather than weakened or challenged.

In light of this, it is necessary to say a few words about the scope of text that will be used to substantiate the claims about von Balthasar in this book. I have in large part confined myself to the books which some might consider more academic: that is to say, many of the delightful little books about various topics from Mary to meditation do not come in for much discussion here. I believe these books may be taken as applications to particular cases of general principles to be found elsewhere in the corpus.

The bulk of the text examined comes from the Triptych, the volumes comprising *The Glory of the Lord*, *Theodrama*, *Theologic*, and the *Epilogue*. This is von Balthasar’s mature constructive work, and even his own reflections on his productivity focus our attention on it. However, several other works are important and will be referred to extensively: *Cosmic Liturgy*, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, and *A Theology of History*. These are not exclusively the texts that will be used (as a glance at the bibliography will show), but they form the core of the texts from which the argument will be developed.

Thus, the central texts could be divided between primarily historical works (*Cosmic Liturgy*, *The Theology of Karl Barth*) and constructive works (*A Theology of History*, the Triptych). The division may not be neat, given the depth of

historical engagement throughout the Triptych and especially in *The Glory of the Lord*, but it is important. For the type of historical engagements to be found in the constructive works differ from the historical engagements of von Balthasar's earlier period, and precisely in this way: the former are engagements which are carried out with an eye to the synthetic, constructive project. They are more concerned with the usefulness of the text to von Balthasar than to explicating the text in its own context. This gives them a certain priority.

The historical texts are of great importance because in them we see von Balthasar doing the type of analysis on others that I am doing on him in this book. The way von Balthasar reads Maximus and Barth may be taken as a guide to how to go about reading von Balthasar. To this end, it is worth reflecting at a little more length on von Balthasar's work with Maximus.

What von Balthasar describes through the first chapter of *Cosmic Liturgy* is the way Maximus builds his metaphysics on Christology. The particular outlines of Maximus's system are not those of von Balthasar's; but what von Balthasar has found in Maximus is someone who is engaged in the same type of project as von Balthasar will eventually engage in. This is the reason so much of what is said about Maximus, Bonaventure, and Barth could be said about von Balthasar as well. He is praising them for doing the thing that he himself sees as needful.

Thus, in the section in *Cosmic Liturgy* on God, we see the tight interconnectedness of analogy, the God-world relation, and the Trinity in von Balthasar's thought. Analogy measures the distance between the Creator and the creation, and as such it grounds the real distinction between essence and existence on the Trinitarian distinctions. This section thus constantly anticipates what is said about the Trinity in *Theologic II*, but it also contains *in nuce* what is to be the final statement of both the likeness and the greater unlikeness between God and creatures, namely aseity expressed in the identity (in God) and non-identity (in creatures) of essence and existence. Von Balthasar clearly thinks that analogy is the great accomplishment of the Maximian synthesis: this is stated as the conclusion to the whole section on Maximus's doctrine of God.⁴⁸

This project, similar to von Balthasar's historical projects, aims primarily at explication. I intend to show the structure of von Balthasar's thought on its own terms. This reading will therefore be sympathetic, as I believe understanding is fundamentally an act of sympathy. It will not be slavishly so, for sympathy need not be blind; but my goal is more to get von Balthasar right than to determine whether the reader should approve of the particular choices made or not.

As a last word of introduction, I ought to comment on the translations used in this volume. Von Balthasar is known to the English-speaking world

through the very detailed translations available from Ignatius press. The amount of labor and erudition that went into the production of these volumes is in itself a worthy imitation of von Balthasar's own intellectual labors. However, some problems in the published translations are significant enough to warrant reference to the original German texts. Whenever possible, I have used the published English versions of von Balthasar's works. When it seemed that reference to the German text was advisable, I have included both the German text and my own English translations.

Notes

1. For von Balthasar, there can be no theologian who is not at the same time a metaphysician: "Da die Frage nach dem Sein als solchem die Grundfrage der Metaphysik ist, ist sie für den Theologen nicht zu umgehen, für ihn folgt daraus bloß, daß er *ex professo* kein Theologe sein kann, ohne zugleich Metaphysiker zu sein, wie . . . eine Metaphysik, die sich weigerte, Theologie zu sein, ihren eigenen Gegenstand verkennen und verleugnen würde" (*TLg* II.159). [Because the question of being as such is the fundamental question of metaphysics, it is not to be passed over by the theologian. For him it simply follows that he *ex professo* can not be a theologian without at the same time being a metaphysician, as . . . a metaphysics which refused to be theology would misunderstand and disavow its own proper object.] (All translations not from a published volume are mine.)

2. This seems to be confirmed by von Balthasar in *TD* V.65, where logic is subordinated to God. The inescapability of referencing some logical intuitions in the first moments of building a metaphysical system does not change this fundamental situation; it only points out how difficult the task of building metaphysics is. If the Cartesian/skeptical value of starting metaphysical reflection from a blank slate (or as close as one can get) is rejected and some evidence is permitted as given, primordial, and so on, then the fact that one cannot begin reflection without some intuitions and premises in hand is much less distressing.

3. That is, the combined masterwork whose parts are *The Glory of the Lord*, *Theodrama*, *Theologic*, and the *Epilogue*.

4. Logic is not truth as an epistemological reality, nor is it the beings on which this knowledge rests; it is rather the inner *structure* of truth, the system of relations that create truth as such.

5. Von Balthasar himself identifies the first of these as the most basic question of metaphysics: "The direction of the meandering historical paths of western Metaphysics becomes straightforward and simple if we centre the chaotic fragments around the authentic metaphysical question: 'Why is there anything at all and not simply nothing?'" (*GL* V.613).

6. Carefully considered, this passage only asserts that, following both the etymology of "metaphysics" and the changed nature of the science of physics, the original referent of "metaphysics" can no longer truly be designated by that word. The whole point of introducing "meta-anthropology" is not to talk about something different, but to *make sure* we do not end up talking about something different.

7. Thus, in von Balthasar's view, metaphysics is never in fact free from theology; however, it makes a great deal of difference whether metaphysicians are aware of the theological situation that conditions their work or not.

8. See also *TL* I.15: "Integration: a program of this nature requires rigorous collaboration between philosophy and theology, but such collaboration is possible only if both disciplines are intrinsically open to each other. But this intrinsic openness is itself possible only on the condition

that we recenter our intellectual effort on thinking through the analogy between the divine archetype and the worldly image from both sides.”

9. This book will be important throughout our study, for reasons that will be explained later (chapter 1, IV).

10. See also this passage from *Cosmic Liturgy*, where ontology stands in for philosophy and metaphysics stands in for theology: “The synthesis we have just described is a genuinely transcendental one—or, if one wants to distinguish between ontology and metaphysics, a metaphysical one, which concerns the ultimate basis for created being as such. The syntheses that follow attempt rather to describe created being from within; they are, in a more narrow sense, ontological syntheses. Still, the two realms cannot be cleanly divided. An ‘immanent’ theory of being finds its final explanation and illumination only in metaphysics, which sets created being against the background of absolute being” (CL 154).

11. The question whether he has succeeded or not is not, however, ridiculous.

12. “Maximus’ whole philosophical undertaking [with regard to Christology and soteriology], which we have described, stands in service of this highest synthesis, which is purely biblical; its function is to prevent the creature, understood in its essential identity, from being overwhelmed and dazzled in this loving encounter with God, openly or implicitly, to such a degree that it is reduced merely to the level of an ‘appearance.’ By preserving the metaphysical rights of humanity—in the human nature of Christ and in the ordinary human person—Maximus provides the support for man’s right to grace as well” (CL 55).

13. Chapter 1, II

14. This is a version of the German proverb “Wer mehr Wahrheit sieht, hat mehr recht” (“Whoever sees more truth is more right”). Von Balthasar quotes this proverb in *Epilogue* 15. This idea is fundamental to von Balthasar’s whole project, but can be seen most distinctly at work in *Truth Is Symphonic: Aspects of Christian Pluralism* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987) and *In the Fullness of Faith: On the Centrality of the Distinctively Catholic* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988).

15. *Glory of the Lord*, 280–313.

16. *H III.I.1.17*, footnote 4: “Ich mußte darauf gefaßt sein, ehe man mich auch nur ausreden ließ, zum alten neuplatonischen Eisen geworfen zu werden.” [I had to be prepared to be thrown out as an outdated Neo-Platonist before anyone let me finish speaking.] He goes on to quote H.-E. Bahr, who does just that, saying that von Balthasar is in pursuit of a Neo-Platonic Christian mysticism.

17. Chapter 3, I.A.

18. The ground of the positivity of otherness in the Trinity is discussed in chapter 3, especially section II.A, and chapter 6, I.A.1.

19. Chapter 4, II.A.

20. For a few examples, see: Steffen Losel, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling: Balthasar’s Negative Theology of Revelation” (*Journal of Religion* 82, no. 4 [Oct. 2002]); Larry Chapp, *The God Who Speaks: Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Theology of Revelation* (San Francisco: International Scholars, 1996); Nicholas J. Healy, *The Eschatology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

21. CL 71.

22. Peter Henrici warns that von Balthasar’s relationship to Aquinas is very complicated: “von Balthasar’s relation to Thomas is neither that of an enthusiastic admirer and follower, nor a mere exercise in ecclesiastical duty” (“The Philosophy of Hans Urs von Balthasar,” in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work*. Edited by David Schindler [San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991], 162).

23. Thus, when Larry Chapp says that “the old Platonic-Plotinian concept of a direct participation in divinity by way of God’s ‘emanations’ is changed by Thomas into a mediated participation, that is, God’s ‘emanation’ of Being must not itself be hypostasized, must not be ‘divinized’. [...] If God’s emanation of Being to the world was hypostasized, then we would be right back to a metaphysics of identity and this is unacceptable to Christian philosophy” (*God*, 72), the problem is not so much a misunderstanding of Thomas as a misunderstanding of *Platonism*.

Because we have, to von Balthasar's mind, lost the language of analogy (that which separates Platonists from Neo-Platonists), it is doubly challenging for us to untangle von Balthasar's complicated relation to Platonism.

24. "Thus, whether one defines God (Thomas Aquinas) or Christ (Bonaventure) as the formal object of theology [. . .]" (*TL* II.28).

25. "In den Dienst dieses zentralen Satzes stellt Bonaventura seine ganze Lehre von der *Seinsanalogie*, die sehr anders lautet als bei Thomas" (*H* II.297). [Bonaventure places his entire doctrine of the analogy of being, which runs very different than in Thomas, in the service of this central statement.]

26. *TL* II.128 ff., which begins with an appeal to Aquinas, but ends with severe doubts about Aquinas' ability to bring the trinitarian persons into proper focus. The question of nominalism will be discussed in chapter 4, II.A.

27. The central theme of Bonaventure's *Disputed Questions on the Mystery of the Trinity* is that all divine attributes are not only compatible with tri-unity, but in fact must be re-thought according to tri-unity to be properly understood. This is close to von Balthasar's own belief that divine attributes are not the attributes of an essence, but of the persons, and so are modulated by the eternal personal life of the Trinity (cf. *TD* V.66).

28. "Solowjew steht am andern Ende der idealistischen Philosophie, deren gewaltige Ernte er in die christliche Theologie einbringt" (*H* II.17). [Soloviev stands at the other end of idealistic philosophy, whose enormous harvest he brings into Christian theology.]

29. *GL* V.572 ff., *TD* I.54 ff., *TD* I.578 ff., *TD* V.224–27, *TL* III.41ff.

30. See *GL* V.628–29.

31. Perhaps the most noteworthy passage on Heidegger comes in a footnote on *TL* II.134. There, Heidegger's onto-theological problematic is rejected as applying to the trinitarian logic von Balthasar is developing. It is interesting because the immediate context is Aquinas and Augustine, whom von Balthasar is both praising and critiquing; but to the extent that von Balthasar's use of the Trinity to free Aquinas and Augustine from Heidegger's concern is valid, it will be clear that he is even less subject to Heideggerian criticism than they on this point.

32. Among those who recognize the fundamental nature of the Bonaventuran debt, two are worthy of mention: Aidan Nichols says that "Balthasar prefers to take his cue here not from Augustine (and Thomas after him) but from Thomas's Franciscan contemporary, Bonaventure" ("The Theo-logic," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, edited by Edward T. Oakes and David Moss, 158–71, [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004], 166); this is seconded in John O'Donnell, who says that "Balthasar nevertheless finds himself in disagreement with certain tendencies in [the Augustinian-Thomistic] tradition and aligns himself rather with Bonaventure and the Franciscan school of theology" ("Truth as Love: the Understanding of Truth according to Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Pacifica* 1:2 [1988], 200). Bonaventure is then invoked on the procession of the Holy Spirit (*per modum liberalitatis*), which is a bit ironic, as this is where von Balthasar will ultimately part from Bonaventure. This is, unfortunately, the extent of the acknowledgement of the Bonaventuran debt in O'Donnell's article.

33. In this study, the Trinity in its proper dimension remains beyond our reach, for there metaphysics must give way to theology. We will therefore also stop short of the rejection of Bonaventure. Our field of inquiry is one in which, for von Balthasar, Bonaventure reigns supreme.

34. See the section on "East and West," *CL* 44ff.

35. See Martin Simon, "Identity and Analogy: Balthasar's Hölderlin' and Hamann" in *The Analogy of Beauty*, John Riches, ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 77–104.

36. Aidan Nichols, *A Key to Balthasar: Hans Urs von Balthasar on Beauty, Goodness, and Truth* (Baker: Grand Rapids, 2011); Stephen Wigley, *Balthasar's Trilogy* (T&T Clark: London, 2010); Rodney Howsare, *Balthasar: A Guide for the Perplexed* (T&T Clark: London, 2009); Karen Kilby, *Balthasar: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2012).

37. See Thomas O'Meara, "Of Art and Theology: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Systems," *Theological Studies* 42 (Je 1981): 272–76; also, cf. John O'Donnell: "at last Balthasar has completed

the theological synthesis which he proposed over twenty-five years ago. No doubt it is a synthesis. At the same time it is hardly a system" ("Truth as Love: the Understanding of Truth according to Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Pacifica* 1 [1988]: 189).

38. It may rightly be argued that this places von Balthasar's project squarely in the realm of those types of projects Derrida had in his sights in "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." It is, it must be noted, a project that is unashamed of metaphysics and ontology, and is equally in violation of onto-theological critiques as that of Jean-Luc Marion in *God without Being*. It is imperative, however, that we do not allow these more recent critiques to control our reading of von Balthasar. For these are not unfortunate features of his system that are to be excised in an attempt to rehabilitate him—they are fundamental structural characteristics without which the entire system collapses. The refusal to allow them would not so much constitute a refutation of von Balthasar as a refusal to enter into conversation with him at all. Von Balthasar explicitly notes Marion's removal of God from the realm of being as a misstep (*TL* II.163, note 9). Von Balthasar's disagreement with Marion will be seen in its proper light in chapter 2, II.B.

39. For von Balthasar, this is developed primarily from the *Symposium*, when Socrates repeats what he heard from Diotima. In von Balthasar's own summary of this passage, Socrates comes to understand that: "Eros is neither God nor man but 'something in between' (μεταξύ), 'a great *daimon*' therefore, 'for the whole of the *daimonic* is between divine and mortal'; he has the task of 'interpreting and transporting human things to the gods and divine things to men'" (*GL* IV.189). He goes on to say that according to this view, "God does not mingle immediately with men: all communication goes through [the *daimon*]" (*ibid.*).

40. *TH* 16.

41. "We cannot carry on with natural metaphysics, natural ethics, natural jurisprudence, natural study of history, acting as though Christ were not, in the concrete, the norm of everything. Nor can we lay down an unrelated 'double truth', with the secular scholar and scientist on the one hand and the theologian on the other studying the same object without any encounter or intersection between their two methods" (*TH* 18–19).

42. "Nor, finally, can we allow the secular disciplines to be absorbed by theology as though it alone were competent in all cases because Christ alone is the norm" (*TH* 19).

43. "Precisely because Christ is the absolute he remains incommensurate with the norms of this world; and no final accord between theology and the other disciplines is possible within the limits of this world. Refusal of any such agreed demarcation on the part of theology, though it may look like and be called arrogance, is really no more than respect for the methodological demands of its subject" (*ibid.*).

44. Although the Father is more fundamental than the Son, this does not affect the Son's privileged place with reference to creation: "daß die 'Unterordnung des Sohnes unter den Vater' (von der Paulus spricht) in keiner Weise seine Absetzung von seiner Herrschaft über den Kosmos besagt" (*TLg* II.142). [That the "subordination of the Son under the Father" (of which Paul speaks) in no way means his demotion from lordship over the Cosmos.]

45. What "person" means for von Balthasar here may be illustrated from a passage in the *Theology of History*, where he glosses "personality" as "the psychological center of man's free and reasonable acts, which would not be a center were it not so ontologically" (*TH* 15, note 2). Thus, while on the one hand he seems to be accepting the modernist tendency to read person psychologically, on the other hand he is grounding this in a prior ontological reality. The claim is thus that personality is ontologically central, and as such forms the center of the psychological faculties. It would be a typical Balthasarian deduction to say that this is the appearing in the created realm of that principle on which it is founded, and thus a reflection of the personhood that stands at the metaphysical center.

46. For Heidegger, metaphysics transcends "beings" in rising to ask the question about "Being" as such. His is a perpetual struggle against the way in which beings obscure their ground, annihilate the question about Being. However much the later Heidegger may indicate a connection between Being and God (and even more stringently deny it on onto-theological

grounds), philosophically speaking personhood as such doesn't play a role in grounding the relation of Being to beings, nor in the dynamics of concealedness and openness. See Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Gregory Fried and Richard Polt, trans (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000). Von Balthasar seems to indicate that he interprets Heidegger as disallowing such a personal principle at the heart of reality in *Epilog* 21.

47. This is clear from the fact that it is *particulars* and not a *specific* particular that is the privileged location for philosophical analysis.

48. "At this point, the whole theory of unity returns to the simple scheme of analogy of being between God and the world: to the absolute transcendence of God and his immanence in created being" (*CL* 114).