Von Balthasar and the Problem of Being

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The 'question of Being' is in a sense deeply against the spirit of the age since the rise of hermeneutics has substantially led to the eclipse of a traditional metaphysics of the self and the world. The central role of ontology in the thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar therefore makes him appear as a figure who is deeply against the grain of much current thinking, and who stands as a bulwark in defence of traditional, or classical, perspectives.

We can trace two primary sources for the role of Being in von Balthasar's theology. The first is Martin Heidegger, whose vocabulary of *Seinsvergessenheit* ('forgetfulness of Being') sounds throughout von Balthasar's discussions of Being. The very centrality of Being and of the Ontological Difference (which von Balthasar reads as a thomistic real distinction), is a sign of von Balthasar's debt to the German philosopher, even if he proves highly critical of many aspects of the heideggerian project in its particularity.[1] By far the more important influence is that of Thomas Aquinas, who is discussed in a section from the fourth volume of the English translation (*The Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity*) and again in the fifth (*The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*). According to von Balthasar, 'what Thomas does is to use beauty to define being'.[2] This is a resonant statement indeed, since, to a not inconsiderable extent, it holds also for von Balthasar himself and the whole of his *Herrlichkeit* project. Time and again during these central volumes, von Balthasar will return to the theme of Being as that which governs the most fundamental aspects of aesthetics, philosophy and theology, as well as the understanding of the human and the grounding of human experience.

In the case of Thomas, the two dimensions of the aesthetic and the ontological come together in the theme of proportionality: of *ordo, harmonia, consonantia* and *proportionalitas*. Proportionality sustains a universe in which one thing is ordered harmoniously to another, and the whole is ordered harmoniously to a single principle. Proportionality secures the structure of interaction and participation, in which one element reveals another and the whole comes into view in its parts (the very essence of aesthetic perception). But proportionality also guarantees the principle of what von Balthasar calls oscillation, or *Schwebung*, whereby the single element is held in suspension between surrounding forces and thus itself becomes expressive of an encompassing mystery. Where the ground of its suspension is the divine creativity, then it can be said to transmit or mediate the light of transcendence, or what von Balthasar more generally calls 'glory'. The extreme proximity between ontology and aesthetics becomes apparent here, where beauty is precisely that of the universe, and its ground is the Christian creator God. It is a short step from this to the notion of Being as the 'beauty' or 'likeness' of God, a deeply platonic idea to which Thomas—von Balthasar argues—gives profoundly Christian form.

At the level of the ontological, proportionality requires two specific themes.

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The first is that of the 'real distinction', which is to say the difference between *esse* and *essentia*, between being and essence. Without that distinction, we shall have no awareness of being as such, but only of essences, and our world will lack both mystery and beauty. The thomistic real distinction moreover understands being to be non-subsistent; it is pure act, the *actus essendi*, and is to be distinguished from the being which truly subsists only in God, where *esse* and *essentia* are one. Thomistic being therefore, which is the object of this primal ontological intuition, is marked both by total fullness and total nothingness: 'fullness because it is the most noble, the first and most proper effect of God... But being is also nothingness since it does not exist as such...'.[3]

The second important factor is the transparency of being to its creator. This in turn requires distance, for here there must be a sense of free bestowal. The creature must know that it is 'separate in being' from God for only than can it know itself:

> to be the most immediate object of God's love and concern; and it is precisely when its essential finitude shows it to be something quite different from God that it knows that, as a real being, it has had bestowed upon it that most extravagant gift—participation in the real being of God.[4]

The distance opened up by the role of God as Creator thus bestows 'a new kind of intimacy' with the creature.[5] In fact, von Balthasar reads the 'de-essentializing of reality' as:

> an extension within philosophy of the illumination by biblical revelation of the idea of God as creative principle. When God, in his knowing and omnipotent love, is seen as freely choosing to create, there can be no question of a restrictive fragmentation of being into finite essences. Esse can be suspended without confusion or limitation, in creaturely, free infinity and perfection, before the free God and only thus become the allusive likeness of the divine goodness: *ipsum esse est similitudo divinae bonitatis*.[6]

Von Balthasar places an ontology of *Schwebung* at the heart of his theological and philosophical system. The lack of such 'suspension' or 'oscillation', he argues, leads to fateful philosophical consequences. If esse is taken to be the guiding principle to which God himself is subordinate (as we find, he will argue later, in Scotus and forms of Nominalism), then it becomes 'a supreme and completely vacuous essential concept', leading to rationalism and finally to 'positivistic science'. But the identification of Being itself with God becomes 'pantheistic idealism' (as, according to von Balthasar, we find in Eckhart and his tradition) and again leads to the destruction of philosophy (as the move from Hegel to Feuerbach shows). In both cases moreover being loses all sense of transcendence and the human observer remains as the sole site of glory.[7] Being therefore needs to held distinct from God, neither confused with him, nor detached from him, but reconciled with him through the proportionalism (or analogy[8]) of divine creation. Only in this way can the principles of reality and mystery, which are the ground of the manifestation of divine love be maintained:

> The metaphysics of Thomas... is a celebration of the reality of the real, of that all-embracing mystery of being which surpasses the powers of human

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> thought, a mystery pregnant with the very mystery of God, a mystery in which creatures have access to participation in the reality of God, a mystery which in its nothingness and non-subsistence is shot through with the light of the freedom of the creative principle, of unfathomable love.[9]

Von Balthasar's reflections upon the philosophical condition of the modern world are marked by considerable melancholy and regret:

> That which deserved the name of glory in the sphere of metaphysics has been lost to view. Being no longer possesses any radiance, and beauty, banished from the transcendental dimension, is confined to a purely worldly reality...[10]

Only the metaphysics of Thomas and to some extent that of Heidegger stand as a bulwark against this, since in the 'real distinction' of the former and the 'Ontological Difference' of the latter, Being is set apart from the existent entities in and through which it is manifest: 'if we close the circle, no matter how, between Being and essence (the existent), then 'glory' as a metaphysical category is lost'.[11] It is 'the transcendentalising analogy', promised by Heidegger but achieved by Thomas, which 'causes worldly beauty gradually to become metaphysical, mythical and revelatory splendour'.[12]

Towards the end of the fifth volume, von Balthasar's analysis of Being takes on a subjective colour, as he focuses upon the creature of metaphysics: the individual who receives or recognises Being. Using material already elaborated in an earlier section entitled 'metaphysics of the saints', he develops the notion of the simultaneous fullness and poverty of 'God-given Being':

> fullness as Being without limit, poverty modelled ultimately on God himself, because he knows no holding on to himself, poverty in the act of Being which is given out, which as gift delivers itself without defence (because here too it does not hold on to itself) to the finite entities.[13]

This structure of fullness and poverty is repeated at the level of the one who receives Being and who now 'comprehends the letting-go of Being—as letting-be and letting-stream, handing on further—as the inner fulfilment of the finite entity'. This is the language of the *analogia entis*, 'which makes of the finite the shadow, trace, likeness and image of the Infinite'. But this participation in the divine image does not mean that

> the finite 'first' constitutes itself as a 'closed' entity or subject (through the seizing and hoarding of the parcel of actuality which it is able to take into itself from the stream of finite Being) in order 'then' (and perhaps for the rounding-out of its own perfection) to pass the surplus on. But rather in such a way that the finite, since it is subject, already constitutes itself as such through the letting-be of Being by virtue of an 'ekstasis' out of its own closed self, and therefore *through dispossession and poverty becomes capable of salvaging in recognition and affirmation the infinite poverty of the fullness of Being and, within it, that of the God who does not hold onto himself*' (my italics).[14]

This discussion of the poverty of Being and its symmetries in the life of the individual becomes for von Balthasar the so-called metaphysics of the saints, for whom '[T]ranscendence as a going beyond the self clearly becomes the yielding

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of the self (faith, hope, love) to the unfathomability of divine love'.[15] It is a profoundly Christian issue, and of this poverty of spirit he says:

> [O]nly on this level and in this medium can the event take place which the Bible describes as the process from (God) person to (man) person: predestination, election, vocation, justification, sanctification, glorification (Rom 8, 28-30), for all these are *modi* of radiant and universal love...[16]
>
> In the modern world that is forgetful of Being, and which is therefore experiencing 'a night deeper than that of the later Middle Ages',[17] the Christian individual finally 'remains the guardian of that metaphysical wonderment which is the point of origin for philosophy and the continuation of which is the basis of its further existence'.[18] It is to the Christian that 'the task of performing the act of affirming Being' in all its wonder, transcendence, love and mystery falls,[19] and, as von Balthasar reminds us in the very final line of volume five: '[I]t is in this sense that the Christian is called to be the guardian of metaphysics in our time'.[20]

I hope that what is inevitably a rather compressed account of some of the thinking on Being in volume five, principally, has shown the extent to which von Balthasar's most fundamental engagement is actually not with the *pulchrum* as such but rather with the understanding of Being which informs it. As Christians we are called to grasp and embrace Being in all its translucence and openness to the divine freedom and gift, which is manifest in the awesome and intimate sense of having being 'permitted entry', which for von Balthasar is perhaps the controlling intuition of Being.[21] By receiving God-given Being in this way, we become ourselves conformed to it, as creatures who possess both fullness and poverty and who enjoy the most intimate sense of relation with the Creator. The reception of Being, von Balthasar maintains, finds its highest expression in our assent to the Christian economy of love between God and humanity, which is 'predestination, election, vocation, justification, sanctification, glorification'. Thus, for von Balthasar, there is the closest possible connection between divine grace and love, on the one hand, and transcendent Being and beauty on the other ('the word of God must be inscribed in the word of Being'[22]); and the synthesis to which he returns time and again is that articulated by Thomas Aquinas in his discussion of the nature and meaning of the beautiful. To such a thomist synthesis is added an implacable and uncompromising emphasis upon the primacy of Being, and an abject refusal of contemporary *Seinsvergessenheit*, which is a distinguishing feature of the ontological thought of Martin Heidegger.

Before moving to a critique of von Balthasar's ontology, we should begin by affirming his prioritisation of Being against the anti-metaphysical trend of modern thought, to which we referred at the beginning of the paper. Whatever the difficulties of establishing a metaphysics in the hermeneutical age, Christian truth is ultimately a statement about loss of self and its transfigured regaining, about death and newness of life; and so the Christian commitment to the ontological project is, or should be, plain. Unless there is a self to be lost, this dynamic, which is the very foundation of Christian experience, will falter, and prove untenable. Existence cannot be assumed without residue into some pure play of signs, or reemployment of significations. There must precisely be a point at which we know that our existence is imperilled through sin and alienation of life, that our existence is wagered through faith in the death and Resurrection of

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Christ, and that our existence is finally renewed, refigured and transfigured, through our own rising with Christ from the dead.

But the particular kind of thomistic ontology which predominates in 'The Glory of the Lord' emphasizes von Balthasar's allegiance to the classical tradition and marks him out as a strongly conservative thinker. Although the 'linguistic turn' is present in the second and third parts of his great work, the virtual absence of hermeneutics in *The Glory of the Lord* reminds us that von Balthasar's mature project was begun decades ago when what we think of today as contemporary thought was just marking its beginnings. The absence of a recognition of the liaisons between social power and knowledge, which deconstructionists have so usefully laid bare in recent decades, contributes to this sense of the traditional. But at the same time we do find elements in von Balthasar's work which are decidedly modern, above all his espousal of 'myth' and preference for the fusing of logos and myth, which is apparent in von Balthasar's—heideggerian—admiration for the pre-Socratics. Indeed, his profound recognition of the role of myth—or narrative—in the formation of human conceptuality (and of course as an underpinning of the Christian revelation itself) is quite radically modern in tone. The work of thinkers such as Ernst Cassirer or Hans Blumenberg in the German tradition or Paul Ricoeur's grand study *Time and Narrative*, have shown the extent to which thought is penetrated by metaphor, and thus by narratives and myths. Indeed, so persuaded is the contemporary theologian John Milbank of what philosophers call incommensurability, that is the impossibility of finding a meta-discourse by which to arbitrate between different narratives, that he advocates that the theology of the future should simply be 'performance' or the renewing renarration of the Christian *mythos*. For Milbank 'the task of such a theology is not apologetic, nor even argument' but he appeals rather to the power of pure 'persuasiveness'.[23] It is notable therefore that von Balthasar's determination not to engage in dialogue with secular culture, and with the hermeneutical critiques of ontology, means that his own work represents a paradoxical combination of the traditional and the postmodern. Indeed, it seems like a last and magisterial performance of the grand myth of Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics, with all its sanctity and splendour, sublimated as a postmodern strategy in its postulation, or indeed performance, of a world in which reason and myth are intimately bound together.

Any reader of von Balthasar will be aware of the strengths of such a fusion of logos and myth: the grand scope and vision of the work, the swell of its imaginative forms, its power—like Circe—to entrance. But there is also a price to be paid. We do not find here a philosophy of the self which stands beyond the parameters of the logos-myth. Thus the way, so richly explored by Rahner, of meaningful dialogue with other faiths is rendered deeply problematic. But also the fusion of logos and myth undermines the capacity of logos to stand above and over myth as critique: seriously to engage with the negotiations between narrative structures (inter-faith dialogue again) or to critique the particular narrative tradition from within. Critique in that sense, the sensible use of secularist strategies for laying bare the use and abuse of power is substantially lacking in von Balthasar's work. The Church we love is a composite of divine and human ways, a blend of darkness and light, and sheer obedience, however beautifully grounded, is not in itself enough. Any and all use of power by human

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agents will at some time stand in need of secularist critiques of power ('who is defining what and in whose favour?') if it, too, is at all times to be drawn towards and into the light. This would seem to be an ecclesial imperative, and the recent document by the Pope reflecting an awareness of institutional sins committed against women would seem to be a prime example of the way in which the life of the Church can be positively challenged and purified by important aspects of perspectivalism and the secularist critique of power.

The weakness of von Balthasar's ontology then is its very strength. By making Being an expression of the cosmic *pulchritudo*, weaving it into the threads of the narrative, placing it in glorious suspension between the self-impoverishment of the individual called to holiness and the Creator God, von Balthasar makes of Being an icon: beautifully fashioned, richly adorned. But what of those for whom the devotion to icons is alien, who do not have the cultivated ability to read them correctly, who lack the ecclesial gaze? What of those who have no point of access to von Balthasar's Being, who cannot read the Christian narrative either because it eludes them or because they finally reject it? Do they not, by von Balthasar's account, essentially fall outside the realm of Being, into a de-ontologised world which lacks mystery and glory? Here then we have a sense of borders.

My problem with this is that the Christian narrative itself seems to be uniquely without borders. By taking the loss of God into himself, God, on the Cross, formed a space within himself where those without God can dwell. Thus denial, diremption and alienation from the Christian narrative became a moment in that narrative itself. We may deny God, but he does not deny us. A Christian metaphysics therefore needs to reflect at the level of ontology precisely this inclusivity of the Christian narrative and, critically, its ability not just to think difference but also *to think difference from itself*. It has metaphysically to embrace its own negation, just as the Christian narrative is able narratively to encompass the empty space beyond its own limits. This points in the direction of a metaphysics of kenosis rather than one of creation. This will be no less Trinitarian, of course, but will reflect rather the Trinity in action, transcending itself and engaging itself fully and at risk in the world. It will thus not be a contemplative understanding of Being as object of knowledge, even the knowledge which comes of faith, but will be historical or enacted Being.

Of course, there are difficulties here, not least the perennial difficulty of mapping out the dynamic interchange between knowledge and action, reason and the will. Being that is the object of contemplation, von Balthasar's cosmic *harmonia,* requires a certain way of seeing or understanding the world; which is why he can state that Christian faith safeguards metaphysics and that it is to the Christian that 'the task of performing the act of affirming Being falls'. [24] As we have seen above, this objective Being supports and sustains a subjective Being, which is the sanctified and God-filled existence of the individual, who is marked by 'dispossession and poverty'.[25] In contrast, a kenotic ontology may begin with radical intersubjectivity and only gradually and precariously move out towards an objective view of Being: the Being of the world. The one is a contemplation of Christ, leading to an *imitatio*, while the other will be an *imitatio*, to which any final contemplation may be denied. Both, of course, belong to each other in the osmosis of belief (as faith) and action (love) which is the Christian existential condition. My critique of von Balthasar therefore finally is that his ontology is

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one predicated upon the contemplative, or knowing, aspect of this whole of the Christian person, while a kenotic ontology will be predicated upon the perspective of action. Each must include the other, but the evangelical thrust of the former is its capacity to think new worlds, to intrigue the mind and to draw souls into a distinctively and majestically Christian vision of reality in which the individual is dispossessed before God and made the recipient of a new and divine life. The evangelical thrust of the latter, on the other hand, is to be seen in terms of sanctified action, Christian existence as radical orientation to the other, especially in his or her need, and to God. It is interesting that von Balthasar himself seems to be aware of this other evangelical possibility, when he writes:

> We must therefore ask in what ways the charisms of the founders of the great religious orders achieved philosophical expression. The charismatic indifferentia has rarely been immediately reflected in its philosophical counterpart, and so philosophical transcendence has rarely been the true initiation into the encounter with the glory of God. Not the least reason for this was the fact that intersubjectivity, upon which the ethics of the Gospel is based, failed to find an adequate philosophical foundation in the classical period, and even today has yet to become the principal theme of Christian philosophy.[26]

1 Von Balthasar's view generally is that 'Heidegger represents an attempt to retrieve the classical and Christian form of metaphysical love, as detached readiness for the call of Being; but this attempt must fail, because he projects the fourth distinction into the second and thus turns the oscillation of Being and human existence, which should remain open and pointing beyond itself, into the fixed and indissoluble form of a sphinx, before which and for which man cannot live and love.' (Vol. 5, 643).
2 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord,* vols. 1-7, Edinburgh: T&TClark, 1982-91. Here vol. 4, *The Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity,* 1989, 407.
3 Ibid., 404.
4 Ibid., 404.
5 Ibid., 403.
6 Ibid., 406.
7 Ibid., 405-6.
8 Cf. vol. 5, *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age,* 1991, 598.
9 Vol. 1, Discerning the Form, 1982, 407.
10 Vol. 5, 597.
11 Ibid., 621. Von Balthasar also argues that Being for Heidegger hardens into a formal necessity and is thus incompatible with a liberating and grace-filled freedom (ibid., 625)
12 Ibid., 598.
13 Ibid., 626-627.
14 Ibid., 627.
15 Ibid., 22.
16 Ibid., 627.
17 Ibid., 648.
18 Ibid., 646.
19 Ibid., 648.
20 Ibid., 656.
21 Ibid., 635.
22 Ibid., 631
23 John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory,* Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, 251.
24 Von Balthasar, vol. 5, 648 and cf. 656.
25 Ibid., 627.
26 Ibid., 23.

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