Introduction

Hans Urs von Balthasar was an overwhelmingly far reaching thinker, developing Catholic theology in new directions by drawing on aesthetics, dramatic theory and logic. In his metaphysics, however, one is confronted by a strange conjunction, one that typically unsettles philosophers (particularly post-Kantians of one variety or another) on one side and theologians (following Barth’s relentless attack on the *analogia entis*) on the other. Balthasar has succeeded in making both uncomfortable. Thus, his writings on Being can be justly characterized both as “a return to a pre-Kantian position”,¹ specifically via a recovery of the medieval transcendentals, and as “post-Heideggerian”.² Indeed, “metaphysics in the modern age reaches its climax in Heidegger”, who sees most clearly the deep mystery of Being.³ For Balthasar, Heidegger is “the contemporary *partner* most fecund in view of the elaboration of a theological aesthetics” of glory.⁴ He views Heidegger, interestingly, as raising afresh the key metaphysical achievement of St. Thomas. Thus, Heidegger, for Balthasar, functions as a path of *ressourcement*, of reclaiming St. Thomas, in Heideggerian frame, for a contemporary metaphysics of glory.

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3 Ibid., 231-2.
To elucidate this claim, this investigation will proceed by way of the close reading of three sections in Balthasar’s trilogy. First, his examination of Aquinas’ metaphysics in GL4, which he sees as at once the cumulative unification of ancient philosophical and Christian theological reflection, and an innovative “major creative achievement”, namely, in the ‘real distinction’ between existence (esse) and essences.5 Second, Balthasar’s treatment of Heidegger’s philosophy itself in GL5, 6 which, despite failing to see the infinite creative freedom to which Being points, is the apogee of modern metaphysics. Finally, the creative ‘fourfold distinction’ of Being elaborated at the end of GL5,7 articulating his own version of “Thomist-Heideggerian metaphysics”.8

Even though he views Heidegger as the culmination of modern metaphysics, Balthasar still distinguishes himself quite strongly from the views of the latter. This is particularly felt with the question of ontotheology, which can be understood as the binding together of being, God and logic in metaphysical systems to make a traversable, intelligible whole. In an ontotheological system, God is understood as the highest being, and all being—even the Being that gives rise to beings—is thoroughlygoingly accessible to human reason. As Kerr explains, Heidegger sees the philosophical (ontotheological) tradition having “always at least tended to

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7 *GL5*, 613-28.
8 Davies, “The theological aesthetics,” 141.
represent ‘Being’ as itself a being, and as having a ground, even as itself being the ground—usually, Heidegger thinks, as the supreme being, in other words: God”.

Heidegger accuses the entire Western metaphysical tradition of such ontotheology and subjects it to *Destruktion*, to overcome thereby its forgetting of Being. By no longer considering Being itself a ‘being,’ a substantial, fixed entity—even if the ground of all things—but rather as that source that gives rise to actual beings, Heidegger recovers Being as a totality, as a non-subsistent act by which all that is accedes to existence. Schindler puts it this way: “Indeed, the real difference between Being and beings can come to light only if ‘beings’ are experienced as a totality—and there is literally an infinite difference between beings taken as an endless series, and beings taken as a totality”.

What has tended to happen, Heidegger thinks, in the history of Western philosophy is that Being itself—the infinite, eventful act by which beings come into being—has been reduced to one entity, even if, as the ground of all that is, a very large one.

Balthasar shares Heidegger’s concern for the integrity of the mystery of Being, “preserving and respecting” it rather than seeking its conceptual capture. He carefully “reads the voices of the tradition with Heidegger’s concerns in mind”. Indeed, “[T]here is so much in Heidegger’s philosophy that Balthasar embraces with an astonishing warmth”. Yet simultaneously, Balthasar maintains his distance from Heidegger on the central question of God. While Heidegger is content to ask, “How does the god enter philosophy?” (“Wie kommt

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der Gott in die Philosophie?”), Balthasar asks, according to Schindler, a much more provocative question: “Wie kommt der Mensch in die Theologie?”, that is, “How does the human enter theology?” 14 Balthasar asks this question because true—and therefore Christian—metaphysics must begin from the fact of revelation and under this light illuminate the nature of Being.

Heidegger, on the other hand, allows an understanding of Being to govern the conditions of God’s entry into philosophy. In his philosophy, “God’s relationship to humanity is thus subordinate to conditions established prior to that relationship—and not by God, but by being”. 15 For Balthasar, all events in being are coloured and textured by virtue of having been created by a God of love, a God who appears in revelation as poverty, as well as fullness. Speaking now in fully dogmatic terms, “Christ renders present, in a manner definitive for the world, the divine being, and just so becomes... the judicial measure”. 16 Because of this utter reversal of starting points, “The difference between Heidegger and Balthasar on the question of the significance of metaphysics, and in relation to this the ‘status’ of the question of onto-theology, is palpable from the beginning and all the way through”. 17 The beginning, for Balthasar, is, as for many Catholic theologians, St. Thomas Aquinas.

1. St. Thomas’ ‘Major Creative Achievement’

Aquinas himself contributed little, in one sense, to the discussion of beauty Balthasar undertakes in the seven volumes of the Theological Aesthetics. In another sense, however, everything is changed. St. Thomas represents beauty in light of the transcendentals, and the

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14 Ibid., 113.
15 Ibid., 106.
transcendentals in light of the ‘real distinction.’ This is “Thomas’ major creative achievement—his definition of esse and its relation to essences”.\(^\text{18}\) Something lost in English, but present in all the Western languages where this has had a decisive impact, is the distinction between ‘being’ as an act and ‘being’ as a noun, a thing.\(^\text{19}\) In Latin, the distinction is between esse (‘to be,’ ‘being’ as an act) and essentia (‘essence,’ ‘being’ as a thing). St. Thomas’ contribution, of course, was not simply to use Latin to make such a distinction.

St. Thomas’ true distinction, his “major creative achievement,” was recognizing that Being is not exhausted by the beings in the world. While beings come to exist only through the act that Being is, they are not coextensive with it. Rather, Being (esse) remains an infinite, pure act. As Balthasar himself writes, “Thomas sees esse as the non-subsistent fullness and perfection of all reality”.\(^\text{20}\) The non-subsistence of Being is significant for St. Thomas’ characterization of it. As an act, and not a thing, Being does not subsist as a concrete entity—it does not even, strictly speaking, exist. For “just as one cannot say that running runs”, so also “one cannot say that existence exists”.\(^\text{21}\) Instead, Being is, for St. Thomas, the free, pure act of God the Creator.

From Pseudo-Dionysius, St. Thomas learned the key formulation. The act of Being—in Latin, the actus essendi—is the “primary, immediate and comprehensive cosmic operation of God”.\(^\text{22}\) Since, further, this actus essendi is the “supreme ‘likeness of divine goodness’”,\(^\text{23}\) the sign of the divine creative freedom, “God can no longer in any way be regarded as the being of

\(^{18}\) von Balthasar, GL4, 393.
\(^{19}\) As much as possible, the terms used will be Being (as an act) and being or beings (as a thing or things).
\(^{20}\) GL4, 393.
\(^{21}\) Thomas Aquinas, In Boeth. de Hebd. 2; quoted in GL4, 404.
\(^{22}\) Ibid., 401.
\(^{23}\) Ibid., 393.
things, except in the sense that he is their efficient, exemplary and final cause”. This was always the great danger of Christian metaphysics, namely, the danger of collapsing God and being into one, and thus succumbing simultaneously to Heidegger’s ontotheological charge and, much more dangerously, to idolatry.

Now, with the doctrine of the actus essendi, God can no longer be understood as the “being of things,” as their ground, their actuality or their ontological density, so to speak. But for the first time, and in thoroughly metaphysical terms, God is spoken of as their Creator. With St. Thomas, then, we are left with roughly three ‘levels’ of being, if one dares to speak this way: God’s self-subsistent divine Being, the non-subsistent act of Being, and subsistent beings or entities. Through his creative act, the actus essendi, God is “able to ‘discover’ and posit the circumscribed forms” of things in the world. Out of the “infinite range of the possible”, God “stamp[s] out from [Being’s] constantly unlimited fullness” all the things that are.

By achieving a doctrine of the ‘real distinction,’ which allows Being (esse) to be understood as infinite—indeed, the “infinite range of the possible”—what is can no longer be restricted by necessity to what things are now. The plenitude of Being is “constantly unlimited”, and the forms given things out of its fullness have the character of gift, as God sets aside for each one its own peculiar freedom. “[T]he essences of things... must be seen positively as posited and determined by God’s omnipotent freedom and therefore are [sic] grounded in the

24 Ibid., 393.
25 Since God is as pure act, the capitalized Being will also be used for God. However, this is always with two caveats: first, God is subsistent, as both act and actuality, while the act of Being is not. Additionally, in what sense God is ‘subsistent’ or ‘pure act’ can only be at the infinite extremity of the analogia entis. As von Balthasar writes, “The real distinction between existence and essence [which does not hold for God] necessarily opens our eyes to the truth that God is self-subsistent being but it also closes our eyes and forbids us to cling on to what we have seen” (GL4, 405).
26 GL4, 403.
27 Ibid.
unique love of God”. As the act of this fullness, the actus essendi, or Being, has only an "allusive likeness of the divine goodness”. Indeed, God and his goodness are always “above all cosmic being, above everything that can be calculated or attained within the structures, real or ideal, of the cosmos”. God is truly “the ‘Wholly Other’”. But just so, the finite freedom of beings is revealed. In their “wholly new plasticity” under the infinite shaping activity of God, they are shown to be made by another—subsistent, but not subsistent in and for themselves.

[It] is precisely when the creature feels itself to be separate in being from God that it knows 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.

At an infinite remove from God, the creature also has a true share in God’s Being. Of course, recounting what St. Thomas delineated earlier, this “participation” cannot be understood at any essential level, but rather as a sharing in the creative act of God. Indeed, it is only as a passive recipient of this act that a being participates in God’s Being. Nevertheless, this gift of the being’s existence awakens it, in its freedom, to its having been made by another, to “the experience of the possibility that all things (including myself) might not have been”.

All Being is thus seen by the creature in its freedom in its majestic infinity. This is the philosophical act or attitude of wonder, which is “not only the beginning of thought, but—as

28 Ibid., 404.
29 Ibid., 406.
30 Ibid., 393.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., 404.
33 Ibid.
34 Schindler, Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Dramatic Structure of Truth, 297 (emphasis in original).
Heidegger sees—also the permanent element (αρχή) in which it moves”.35 Thus, philosophical wonder at the Being of the world is an inchoate recognition of its glory. In this way, St. Thomas comes full circle and devises a metaphysics of beauty, a metaphysics of glory. Indeed, his metaphysics is “the philosophical reflection of the free glory of the living God of the Bible and in this way the interior completion of ancient (and thus human) philosophy”.36

As instances of the divine freedom, all things exist in a particular ‘proportion’ with God’s creative act, the actus essendi. All aesthetic concepts, then, are reinterpreted in light of the infinity of Being. Thus, Balthasar writes, “Reality realises only in a proportionality which, while incomprehensible in itself, is the foundation of all order and thus of all form”.37 All subsistent beings thus exist in a certain proportionality with each other, the glory of the created world. But also, they exist in a certain ‘proportionality’ with Being itself. Here the meaning of ‘proportionality’ begins to stretch, and it will indeed stretch to the breaking point. For the being’s ‘proportionality’ with Being is like that of the ‘proportion’ between an artist and the wood from which he makes a chest or a key38—in metaphysical terms, the ‘proportion’ between the agent of an efficient cause and its effect.

There is thus an even more stretched ‘proportion’ between God and Being. In St. Thomas’ words, “Consequently it is not unfitting for there to be a similar kind of proportion between God and the creature, although they are infinitely remote from one another”.39 Between the three ‘levels’ of being, then, there are two distinct proportionalities: one holding between Being, the actus essendi, and beings, and a second between Being itself and God. In

35 GL5, 614.
36 GL4, 406-7.
37 Ibid., 408.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., 409.
this way, the creature’s “proportion in relation to God becomes ‘the proportion of a proportion’, what Thomas calls proportionalitas, a suspension of a suspension”.40 The glory of the creation, its orderliness and proportion, thus sits in its hanging from the utter creative freedom of God, from which it is suspended, as it were, like a spider dangling on a thread.

2. Heidegger’s ‘Wonder at Being’

In Heidegger, Balthasar glimpsed a similar “[w]onder at Being”.41 The astonishing task which Heidegger set himself was to undo the forgetting of Being, to recover the fundamental philosophical attitude of wonder at what is—indeed, to ask again the question, “Why is there anything at all and not simply nothing?”.42

The elemental experience of the mystery of reality is expressed by the Greek ‘wonder’ (θαυμάζειν), in the face of the form of existent things, their order and radiant beauty. Behind the question concerning their appearance (ειδος), there is the much more bewildering one as to why anything should exist rather than simply nothing at all.43

Thus, one travels descends again much deeper, from the question of the glorious appearing of beings (aesthetics) into the question of the ‘why’ of there being anything to appear at all (metaphysics). As Heidegger famously begins Being and Time, “This question has today been forgotten”.44

Just as, for Balthasar, Aquinas was untimely (“a kairos”), in a historical moment situated between the “old monistic world of thought... and the approaching dualistic world”,45 so too Heidegger stands at a singular historical moment, namely, the end of the classical

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40 Ibid.
41 GL5, 614.
42 Ibid., 613.
43 Ibid., 432.
45 GL4, 396.
renaisance. For Heidegger, the way back to the remembering of Being is the pursuit of the ancient Greeks, particularly the pre-Socratics, “which need only be pursued more thoroughly than it was by the German classical movement and even by Hölderlin and Nietzsche.” This is the path to be taken, for, in Heidegger’s words, the “retrieval of the origins of our historicospiritual being”.

Balthasar reads what Heidegger is fundamentally doing in Being and Time as “locating the Da-Sein [human existence, the human being]... in the extreme perplexity, the anxiety in which all existence slips away, in order to open up access to the question of Being”. In this early work, Heidegger “does not as yet fix his gaze on Being”, beginning instead with “a methodical laying-bare that permits him to address the question of Being”. When he turns to “the decisive issue”, which is the “emergence of Being”, Heidegger takes up “the φυσις of the Presocratics”, interpreting it “as all-comprehending Being”. With lucid brevity, Balthasar summarizes Heidegger’s understanding of φυσις:

φυσις means for him Being which emerges into phenomenal existence from its primal ground (Urgrund) or depths (Abgrund) and which is prior to all subjectivity... It removes time and history... to the domain of Being itself, which emerges ‘cosmically’ (weltend) as world and, in a primal and critical struggle... as that ‘dominating and undominated becoming-present (An-wesen) to thought.’

In Heidegger’s “all-destroying return to the primal question”, represented here by a new attempt at discerning the Pre-Socratic understanding of φυσις, he can spare only Nietzsche,
Rilke, Trakl and Hölderlin.\textsuperscript{54} All other figures in the Western philosophical tradition are implicated in a forgetting of Being, of covering over its meaning, as if everyone already understands what is meant by it.

Interestingly, Balthasar argues that “more than anyone else, Thomas Aquinas is in harmony with Heidegger”.\textsuperscript{55} “For both”, he writes:

\begin{quote}
[T]he act of Being, which comprehends within it all that is, is illumination (and thus the original locus of truth), is origin, the greatest proximity (\textit{intimum}) in the greatest distance (‘more existent than all that exists’), and at the same time it is nothingness (the non-substizing), the unity beyond all number.\textsuperscript{56}
\end{quote}

This last phrase, “the unity beyond all number,” betrays how Balthasar reads the genealogy of these figures. Behind both, “there stands not Aristotle, but that Plotinus for whom Being remains a superconceptual mystery”.\textsuperscript{57} Of course, St. Thomas was delivered Plotinus through the thought of Pseudo-Dionysius, whom he regarded as almost on par with apostolic authority. The linking of Plotinus to Heidegger seems more ponderous. In a footnote Balthasar explains: “Because Plotinus is usually assigned a place within the Platonic tradition, and this counts as ‘forgetfulness of Being’ for Heidegger—something that is in reality not the case for Plotinus—Heidegger prefers to begin first with the pre-Socratics”.\textsuperscript{58}

Since metaphysics was first lost “in the hands of Plato”,\textsuperscript{59} Heidegger consigns the remainder of the Western philosophical tradition, which is in one way or another derived from his thought, to “the scrap-heap of ontotheology”.\textsuperscript{60} Balthasar, however, seeks to save just one

\begin{footnotes}
\item[54] Ibid.
\item[55] Ibid., 434.
\item[56] Ibid., 434-5.
\item[57] Ibid., 435.
\item[58] Ibid., 435, n.44.
\item[59] Ibid., 431.
\item[60] Sciglitano, “Contesting the World and the Divine,” 541.
\end{footnotes}
figure from this graveyard, and at first glance, a strange one at that. Plotinus, the fountainhead of neo-Platonism, with his view of the One beyond all being, would be a likely candidate for the unlovely condemnation of ontotheology. But much is at stake here. For if Balthasar can rescue Plotinus from Heidegger’s gavel, he is also saving Pseudo-Dionysius, and by implication, also St. Thomas. But if Plotinus falls to the charge of ontotheology, St. Thomas is also condemned, just one more thinker in a long history of the forgetfulness of Being.

But Balthasar does not flesh this out further. Instead, he turns to another question quite too quickly, leaving the reader to the exposition of Plotinus in GL4.61 This question is how far Heidegger is able to incorporate all the “fundamental principles of classical-mythic and Christian-theological thought, together with its ‘glory’... under threat in all the various metaphysics of spirit”, and further, and more to the point, “how far does his thought fail to do justice to precisely the object which is the orientation of his thinking; Being itself... ?”.62 For Balthasar will go on to argue that because Heidegger evacuates God from his philosophy, he ironically cannot sustain the distinction between Being and beings that is the central axiom of his philosophy. Amazingly, Balthasar will argue that Heidegger ends up being simply another philosopher of identity!

Being for Heidegger, as is true of the actus essendi for Aquinas, is non-substantial. It is not a subsistent entity, even as a ground, that bears the weight of all things, but is instead an act, the pure act of the coming-to-be of existents. Being, for Heidegger, “is dominant in all forms of essence, making them possible, and yet goes far beyond them. Only by the presence

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61 GL4, 280-313.
62 GL5, 435.
and indwelling of Being is there such a thing as existence or essence? But here problems begin to unfold: “Since Being is that which is non-essential in its distinction from the existent (essence), it attracts the kind of definitions which negative theology reserves for God”. Being is “wholly Other to all Being, is Non-Being”. The key to this collapsing into apophatic terms for the act of Being itself is, in Balthasar’s view, the eclipsing of God by Heidegger’s philosophy. In metaphysical terms, Heidegger has “revokes the Christian distinction”, that distinction between “limitless subsisting Being”, and so must identify it with “limitless non-subsisting” Being. By this route, Heidegger lapses into a negative theology, with its object as Being. Thus, Heidegger unwittingly commits his own ontotheology. Balthasar’s explanation is worth quoting in full:

[Heidegger] creates the notion of a superconceptual actus essendi which renders itself temporal within essences, by attributing to it the properties of the subsisting (divine) act. And because the former must be radically annihilated in order to attain temporal expression, this nothingness, which makes the subjective-objective ‘illumination’ (‘Lichtung’) possible, becomes an attribute of absolute Being. In other words: Heidegger identifies the negations of the classical, Christian doctrine of God (as ‘Negative Theology’) with the nothingness of the act of Being which constitutes world. The consequence of this is that once again... God has need of the world if He wishes to make explicit His own implications... Heidegger initially denied that Being stands in ‘need’ of the existent in order to become itself, although later he affirmed it in ever clearer terms... The difference between Being and the existent, which is the primary characteristic of createdness, is thereby raised to the status of the absolute, of God.

For Balthasar, the solution is quite simple: difference is only preserved where the three distinct ‘levels’ of being are preserved: the limitless subsisting Being (i.e., God), limitless non-subsisting Being (the act of Being, the creative act), and limited subsisting beings (all things that are). Put another way, difference is only preserved where the ‘Ontological Difference’ is preserved: “The

63 Ibid., 436.
64 Ibid.
65 Martin Heidegger, Was ist Metaphysik?, 41; quoted in ibid., 436.
66 GL5, 447.
67 Ibid., 447 (emphasis in original).
attempt to incorporate all aspects of the Christian inheritance within an ontology stands or falls with the interpretation of the Ontological Difference between the existent and Being. For Heidegger there can be only one distinction”. 68

Precisely to preserve the Ontological Difference itself—the first ‘proportion’ of St. Thomas—one needs the second difference, that between God and Being. Balthasar writes a bit later of these two gaps, proportions or differences, now explicitly in terms of the *analogia entis*:

> Where the immanent analogy of Being which pertains between the *actus essendi* and *essentia* does not deepen to a transcendental analogy of Being between God and the world, it *annuls itself by becoming identity* and pays the price that it now needs to reconcile within itself the most contradictory elements... Here too Hölderlin’s Ἕν διαφζρον ἑαυτώ [the One differing from itself] is the final word. 69

Thus, with the utmost of irony, Heidegger is condemned to a philosophy of identity, because he would not admit God the Creator, allowing for a deepening of the proportions. Instead, Being becomes ultimately identified with the creative role of God, and in such a way that its self-annihilating self-expression inscribes nothingness into the fabric of absolute Being. These are dire consequences indeed, if Balthasar’s reading of Heidegger is correct.

Nevertheless, Balthasar finds much in Heidegger to admire, and to take up on his terms for a renewed Christian metaphysics. First, Heidegger’s philosophy is peppered with “Christian theological motifs in changed form”. 70 Being, for instance, gives things to appear, and in their eventfulness, Being thus has the character of “graciousness” or “favour”. 71 Also, Heidegger’s interpretation of *Da-Sein* ejects the classical motif of ‘eros’ for that of “serenity (*Gelassenheit*:

68 Ibid., 445.
69 Ibid., 449 (emphasis added).
70 Ibid., 430.
71 Ibid., 437.
indifference, impassiveness, detachment).\textsuperscript{72} Balthasar reads this as a secularizing of the medieval mystics’ \textit{indiferencia}, the spiritual detachment and letting-be of the world.\textsuperscript{73} Indeed, Heidegger goes so far in this direction, “The relationship of self-revealing Being to the passive human creature who receives it is seen here in primal biblical categories, so much so in fact that the Old and New Testament category of ‘glory’ is also present”.\textsuperscript{74} Heidegger’s terms for \textit{Dasein}’s proper relation to Being involve a covenanting, faith and faithfulness, the responsibility to listen and obey, and the presence of Being as to Moses at the bush.\textsuperscript{75} Balthasar writes, “This is that biblical cycle of fidelity as a precondition of truth and of revelation”.\textsuperscript{76} These themes are easily reinscribed in a Christian philosophy of the glory of Being.

Second, and grounding the first, Heidegger resolutely maintains the immanent analogy of Being, that distinction between Being and beings—even if it does not finally hold because it does not deepen into the second, transcendent analogy of Being. For Balthasar, thinking through the immanent analogy is philosophically necessary to the task of theology. He writes, “Christian theology loses its entire basis if it thinks that it can develop the revelation of the living God while bypassing the mystery of this distinction, and it sinks accordingly to the status of being a science of existent things amongst others”.\textsuperscript{77} Unless the stretch of this first proportion is comprehended, God comes to be thought of as just another entity, another existent in the world, an “extra item in the universe”.\textsuperscript{78} Rather, God is “that-without-which-

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 438.
\item \textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 439.
\item \textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 439-40.
\item \textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 440.
\item \textsuperscript{76} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 449.
\item \textsuperscript{78} Sarah Coakley, “Is There a Future for Gender and Theology? On Gender, Contemplation and the Systematic Task,” \textit{Criterion} 47 (Spring/Summer 2009), 5.
\end{itemize}
there-would-be-nothing-at-all”. By thus maintaining this distinction, “Heidegger demands a renewal of aesthetics by the philosophy of the Ontological Difference between Being (Sein) and being-there (Dasein: human existence), which is the emergent manifestation (φαινεσθαι) of Being (φυσις from φυω) in the ecstatic space of Dasein”. Even δοξα, ‘glory,’ is thus recovered by Heidegger, undergoing its own “inner development” in his philosophy. Δοξα now becomes, in Heidegger’s words, “that which every existent conceals and reveals in its appearance (ειδος, ιδεα)”. This play or tension between concealment and revelation—again, a secularized theological motif—becomes the “enchantment and the glory... the irredeemably mysterious character of Being” in Heidegger.

For Balthasar, the philosophy of Heidegger is not optional: “If Christianity, failing to preserve a theology of glory, does not itself wish to fall victim to the new naturalism... then it must make Heidegger’s inheritance its own”. If Christianity, in other words, wishes to preserve the contingency of God’s free creative decision over against scientific naturalism, whose metaphysics posit all that is as necessarily so, as coextensive with Being, then the task laid out by Heidegger must be taken up and perfected with the Christian datum of revelation. Neither will Balthasar rescind from taking up his own challenge, and this he does by way of his metaphysics of the ‘fourfold distinction.’

3. Balthasar’s ‘Fourfold Distinction’

79 Ibid.
80 Ibid., 441-2.
81 Ibid., 443.
82 Ibid.
83 Ibid.
84 Ibid., 450.
In Balthasar’s view, theologians “need a much richer, more specific and more complex configuration than either Aquinas’s existence/essence distinction or (even) Heidegger’s Being/beings difference”. To this end, Balthasar develops his own ‘fourfold distinction.’ The first is the distinction of the ‘I’ from the ‘Thou,’ epitomized by the child and the mother. The second is Heidegger’s distinction of Being from beings. The third is a reversal of this, noting Heidegger’s own tendency in this direction. Namely, Being is only expressed in beings and so has need of them, in a sense, to come to fruition. Finally, the fourth distinction between Being and the creative freedom to which it points.

First, then, “The fact that I find myself within the realm of a world and in the boundless community of other existent beings is astonishing beyond measure and cannot be exhaustively explained by any cause which derives from within the world”. The primordial, inchoate experience of Being which all human beings have is that of being found rather than finding. This is Heidegger’s Geworfenheit, ‘thrownness,’ but with all its existential dread purged. Exemplary of this first distinction is not an Angst, an existential fear of the passing away of all Being, including my own, but rather, the loving first encounter of the baby and its mother. The child’s ‘I’ awakens in the experience of a ‘Thou’: in its mother’s smile through which it learns that it is contained, affirmed and loved in a relationship which is incomprehensively encompassing, already actual, sheltering and nourishing”.

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86 GL5, 615.
87 Although Balthasar resituates this Angst at another level: “Neither my parents nor the whole of the surrounding world are substantially that love to which on the grounds of my being and my consciousness I owe the fact of my being in the world, which is to say both myself and the world. That Angst which Heidegger depicted, in which Being as such disappears for me and with it my sense of self, becomes the methodical way in which to pose the question as to why Being should exist at all” (ibid., 617).
88 Ibid., 616.
The child is able to play, to experience the joy of simply being, because of this nourishing and sheltering love of its mother. The delight of sheer being, without Heideggerian fear, means the child experiences its life as “the incomprehensible light of grace”.

Of course, Balthasar intentionally uses so theologically weighty a word as ‘grace.’ For him, all four distinctions are interwoven, give meaning to the others, and fall apart if one of the distinctions is undone. Thus, the first distinction leads up to the second, as the child’s growing awareness of the contingency of beings opens her “as Spirit to the light-space of Being, which is in no way directed to the Being of the world as a whole”.

The second distinction is Heidegger’s, that between Being and beings. Balthasar describes it this way: “But in so far as I am one existent among others, in so far as I am Spirit, I now understand that all other existents stand in the same relation to Being as I do myself.”

This new understanding leads from play to wonder, as one understands the glorious miracle of Being. Importantly for Balthasar, this is different from simply recognizing the sheer diversity and seemingly infinite number of concrete entities. Rather, it is the deeper, and yet simpler, recognition that all beings attain their being from a deeper source, Being itself. For one “can imagine this total configuration [of beings] to be quantitatively and qualitatively as extended and as perfect as I will, but still it cannot match my most primitive experience of Being, if indeed I were to see in it the unsurpassable abundance of Being”.

89 Ibid.
90 On the way in which the distinctions fall apart if one is removed, see David C. Schindler, “Metaphysics within the Limits of Phenomenology: Balthasar and Husserl on the Nature of the Philosophical Act,” Teología y vida 50.1-2 (2009), 252ff.
91 GL5, 618.
92 Ibid.
93 Ibid.
The “individual finitude as fragments” of various concrete entities reveals something deeper about the nature of the world, namely, that it arises through the gift of Being, St. Thomas’ *actus essendi*. But this also points to the converse truth, that Being only arises in subsistent entities. In other words, that Being itself is non-subsistent, and needs to become subsistent by being the cause of things in the world. In Balthasar’s words, “[T]he fact that (Heideggerian) Being can only be interpreted within existence (Spirit) [the second distinction] points to the complementary antithesis that existence (Spirit) grasps the dependence of Being upon beings and thus its non-substantiality [the third distinction]”. 95

The third distinction, then, is the following: “Precisely by virtue of this dependence... of Being upon its explication in the existent... it is impossible to attribute to Being the responsibility for the essential forms of entities in the world”. 96 Whether this is recognized by a philosopher or not, Balthasar signals, will be evident by whether or not they pay attention to “sub-human Nature”. 97 For the forms of sub-human, or non-spiritual, Nature are too given by Being, but that is unintelligible in terms of Being alone. If beings were only the self-explication of Being, as in Hegel, this problem would be resolved. But since both Heidegger and Balthasar wish to avoid Hegel’s unique and powerful form of ontotheology, the question of ‘who’ or ‘what’ gives forms to essence is potent. The third distinction is, then, in Schindler’s words:

The world of nature becomes important for us only when we realize that we can learn something unique about the meaning of the existence of the world from, to

94 Ibid.
95 Ibid., 619. It should not be missed that Balthasar here expressly distinguishes between Heidegger’s understanding of Being—namely, that it is “interpreted within existence” as it gives beings to be—and the non-substantiality of Being, recognized on in St. Thomas’ “major creative achievement” (GL4, 393). Heidegger sees the third distinction, but does not follow through on its implications (i.e., it demands a Creator).
96 Ibid.
97 Ibid., 621.
quote Balthasar, ‘beetles and butterflies,’ that we cannot simply derive from our reflection on being or on our own subjectivity.  

Heidegger, on the other hand, is so tied up in the “subjectivity” of Dasein as the “shepherd of Being” and so forth, that “the original question as to why there should be something rather than nothing is finally submerged and metaphysics must yield its place to a phenomenology of Being”.  

Thus the very question that initially propelled Heidegger into his investigations is ultimately abandoned in favour of searching out the relationship between Sein and Dasein. As Balthasar writes, “[T]he ‘pivot’ of Being and of the existent (Sein-Seiendes) receives the whole of its meaning from the pivot of Being and human being (Sein-Dasein)”.

Thus, “the third distinction leaves actual Being... hanging in the air”. It cannot explicate how forms are given to beings without, that is, moving on to the fourth distinction. Being cannot itself be responsible for the gift of concrete beings which it gives. It is incapable of “planning... in order to actualise itself in substance”. God, however, is capable of such planning. This is the fourth distinction: between God and the world, or in more traditional theological terms, between Creator and creature. As Sciglitano writes:

For Balthasar, the fact of existence that leads Heidegger and others to ask, ‘why is there something rather than nothing,’ points to divine freedom, and thus to the radical gratuitousness or ‘whylessness’ of our own being, that Heidegger’s thought, despite his best intentions, fails to acknowledge.

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98 Schindler, “Metaphysics within the Limits of Phenomenology,” 250.
99 GL5, 621.
100 Ibid.
101 Ibid., 625.
102 Ibid., 619-20.
103 Here it becomes evident that Balthasar’s metaphysics was propelled by material theological claims all along, but just so, continues to consider this fourth distinction as properly philosophical.
The question that so exercises Heidegger is unanswerable with recourse to an infinite, and infinitely free, absolute Being. The central question, ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’, cannot be answered without it.

In this way, the “formal object of theology lies within the formal object of philosophy”. What Balthasar has thus done is to rework metaphysics from the inside out, transforming it theologically. Thus, Heidegger’s charge of ontotheology against all metaphysics no longer holds, simply because Balthasar has injected revelation right into the core of Being:

[While Heidegger insists that heeding the question of [B]eing, which is the most profound spiritual act, requires the overcoming of metaphysics, for Balthasar, the theological act, which in some respect does indeed transcend the metaphysical act, nevertheless occurs within the heart of the metaphysical act.]

Once this injection has occurred, moreover, it characterizes metaphysics all the way through, from its birth, so to speak. In Schindler’s words, “to paraphrase T. S. Eliot, theology in fact brings us back to the place from which we started and allows us to see it for the first time”. Revelation does not, then, close off the question of Being, as Heidegger famously assumed, but instead, “because of that final securing of reality which the believer who encounters God in Christ experiences, the theological vision makes it possible for the first time for the philosophical act of encounter with Being to occur in all its depth”.

**Conclusion: The Face of Love**

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105 Ibid., 112.
106 In *Theo-Logic II* and III, Balthasar will develop this in a trinitarian light.
107 Ibid., 108.
From the very beginning, then, of Balthasar’s theological aesthetics, the encounter with absolute Being, the ‘who’ who gives Being, is present:

It is only the man [sic] who has encountered the living God in the particular form of revelation chosen by him who can really find God in all things and, thus, who can truly and constantly philosophize. And, because it is the declaration of eternal life for the world, this form of revelation gains universal significance and determines all aspects of the formal object of philosophy.\(^{110}\)

And so, finally, there is a theological justification for Balthasar’s personalism, shown in the first and fourth distinctions, in which relations of persons are given center stage in the origins and then the final progression of the philosophical (metaphysical) act. This because absolute Being itself shows himself in the encounter of revelation, just as the mother shows herself in the first encounter with her child. In this way, “[A] Christian metaphysic is the display of the presence of God the Creator within Being itself”, a God who will not be without his creation.\(^{111}\)

Material theological commitments have thus worked their way into Balthasar’s metaphysics all the way through, taking up and purifying Heidegger’s philosophy from within. In particular, “the Christian doctrine of creation plays a decisive part in what Balthasar would regard as the right way of practicing metaphysics”.\(^{112}\) For creation is undertaken by God with a view to his action in Christ, and so all Being is “prepared in advance for glory”, as Paul writes (Rom. 9:23).

But just so, Heidegger provides in the present day, according to Balthasar, the philosophy capable of developing a Christian understanding of the glory of Being. As Balthasar himself states, “[T]he Greek question about the being of what exists is as new today as it was in

\(^{110}\) Ibid. (emphasis added)

\(^{111}\) Davies, “The theological aesthetics,” 138.

\(^{112}\) Kerr, “Balthasar and metaphysics,” 226.
the age of Heraclitus and Parmenides, of Plato and Aristotle”. Heidegger reopens this question anew for Christian thought, and by his restatement of what is essential in St. Thomas in contemporary terms, allows a new breadth to theology:

[A] philosophy which permits theology to understand and interpret the horizontal dimension of the theo-drama from the ground up, and which, in the case of Heidegger, permits Balthasar to think such things as time, history, finitude, everydayness, pathos and urgency from the fact of the freedom to choose, has ‘theological’ value from the moment in which God reveals himself on this plane, in the interior of the coordinates that shape it.

And in so far, conversely, as God himself enters the Being he creates, electing to reveal himself in it, this Being has always already been prepared for it, as the gift and the site of his utterly free creative glory:

And this dispels the philosopher’s objection that with the rise of Christian theology there has been a regress from Being back to the existent. Being itself here unveils its final countenance, which for us receives the name of trinitarian love; only with this final mystery does light fall at last on that other mystery: why there is Being at all and why it enters our horizon as light and truth and goodness and beauty.

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115 GL1, 158.
Bibliography


