

IN DEFENSE OF THE INTUITION OF BEING

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The intuition of being was lived in actu exercito by St. Thomas [...] but I do not know (and this is perhaps due to my ignorance) of a treatise or disquisitio where it has been studied [...] in actu signato.

—Jacques Maritain, *Untrammelled Approaches*¹

I. INTRODUCTION

For John Paul II, a Thomistic personalist,² metaphysics is at the heart of philosophy; and the act of being, *actus essendi*, is at the heart of metaphysics. “[T]he philosophy of being,” he writes, “is based upon the very act of being itself, which allows a full and comprehensive openness to reality as a whole, surpassing every limit to reach the One who brings all things to fulfillment” (*Fides et Ratio* #97).

Jacques Maritain is a key source for any exploration of the *actus essendi* and, indeed, a thinker whom the Holy Father thanks for his broad contribution to philosophy (*Fides et Ratio* #74). Maritain insists that an intuition of being is vital to an appreciation of the *actus essendi*. He places this intellectual intuition in the judgment that follows abstractive apprehension; this prior apprehension itself depends on sense perception. In distinguishing between apprehension and judgment, he takes pains not to undermine the unity of the intellect. Yet only in judgment, he claims, does idealism (the thesis that to be is to be present to the perceiver) give way to realism (the thesis that to be is to be the subject of an act of existing). Judgment, he writes, “affirms or posits in the mind” the *suppositum*; and it does so “as that subject

¹ Jacques Maritain, *Untrammelled Approaches*, trans. Bernard Doering, Preface by Ernst R. Korn (Heinz R. Schmitz) (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 222, n. 32.

² Karol Wojtyła, “Thomistic Personalism,” in *Person and Community*, trans. Theresa Sandok, O.S.M., Introduction by Stefan Swiezawski (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 165-75.

itself is posited...in extra-mental reality." To make this judgment is "to grasp intuitively, or *to see*, the being, the existence, the extra-mental *esse* of that subject."³

This is the intuition of being. Its object, the *actus essendi*, drives the actualization of whatever is real in accord with its potentiality. An intuition of this act of being leads one to the intelligibility of being, its *ratio entis*. One grasps particular existents as having the act "to be," or "*quasi habens esse*."⁴ One appreciates that everything is in its own analogous way.

But is there, on a close analysis, such an intuition at the core of metaphysics? In what follows, I state what some take to be the strongest objection to the thesis that there is such an intuition and explore what prompts it. Then I argue that the objection is not persuasive. Lastly, I suggest that other objections might be equally problematic.

II. THE SENSORY LIMIT OBJECTION

For ease of reference, we can call the objection at issue "the sensory limit objection." It claims that, given our epistemic limitations, we can have no such intuition of being. For us, the act of existing is restricted to sensible objects, for example, wine and roses—and those who enjoy them. But metaphysics, the study of being as such, cannot limit itself to physical things and their sensible properties. Metaphysics treats of *ens inquantum est ens*. So whatever we find at the core of metaphysics must itself transcend the material. Thus, a friend of the thesis that an intuition of being is at the core of metaphysics faces a formidable task. He or she must show how, for us, this intuition could have bearing not just on physical things but on both possible beings and super-sensible beings as well.

³ Jacques Maritain, *Untrammelled Approaches*, 220.

⁴ In his *Being and Some Twentieth-Century Thomists* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), 131, n. 1, John F. X. Knasas cites Aquinas: "Nam ens dicitur quasi esse habens, hoc autem solum est substantia, quae subsistit" (*ST I*, q. 44, a. 2).

Both Étienne Gilson⁵ (famously) and John Knasas⁶ (recently) argue that such a showing is impossible. Gilson says that an intuition of *esse* would be an intuition of God, and we can have no such intuition. Any intuition that we might have would be of the *esse* of sensible objects. From the knowledge of such contingent beings, we might then argue for the existence of *esse ipse subsistens*. But an argument is not an intuition. Moreover, we cannot think without initial images, yet we have no such image of existence as existence.

John Knasas, for his part, frames his objection in terms of the structure of analogy. That structure involves a sameness understood in terms of differences. We can term such analogical concepts “analogons” and their instances “analogates.” But for us the analogates of *esse* are always sensible. So they cannot give us the range of cases requisite for us to grasp *immaterial* analogates of *esse*. He writes that “we only know the analogon of analogous *esse* through its analogates, and these are sensible. This locus for the apprehension of the analogon fails to provide sufficient insight into the analogon to grasp possible immaterial instances of analogous *esse*.”⁷ Regrettably for us, then, analogy has inescapable and empirical limits.

We have before us, then, two distinct forms of the sensory limit objection to the intuition of being. The first, that of Gilson, claims that such an intuition is tantamount to an intuition of God, and this is impossible. The second, that of Knasas, claims that an analogy of being cannot extend beyond the sensible beings upon which our knowledge is based.

⁵ Étienne Gilson, “Propos sur l’être et sa notion,” *San Tommaso e il pensiero moderno*, ed. Antonio Piolanti (Citta Nuova: Pontificia Accademia Romana di S. Tommaso d’Aquino, 1974), 8-10. John F. X. Knasas calls attention to this passage.

⁶ John F. X. Knasas, “How Thomistic Is the Intuition of Being?” in John F. X. Knasas, ed., *Jacques Maritain: The Man and His Metaphysics* (Mishawaka, Indiana: The American Maritain Association, 1988), 83-92. Knasas refers us to this passage in his more recent *Being and Some Twentieth-Century Thomists*, 131, n. 1.

⁷ John F. X. Knasas, “Gilson vs. Maritain: the Start of Thomistic Metaphysics,” *Doctor Communis* 43 (1990): 263.

III. A PRELIMINARY ABOUT NATURAL PHILOSOPHY

In answering the sensory limit objection, there is a preliminary point to make about the division of labor within philosophy. The point is this: the intuition of being does not displace natural philosophy as an approach to metaphysics. Benedict Ashley, O.P., among others, fears some such displacement, perhaps on the part of those with differing views on the place of Aristotelian foundations in science.⁸ This fear is unnecessary. Without natural philosophy, we cannot make sense of generation and corruption *nor* of matter and form. In setting the stage for a causal inquiry into the coming to be of matter and form, natural philosophy prepares us for the intuition of being. “[M]etaphysical intuition,” Maritain writes, “is formally independent of the philosophy of nature” and yet “materially and as to us, it presupposes the philosophy of nature [...]”⁹ In affirming *esse*, moreover, we can scarcely forget essences and natures. Maritain rightly warns us that “[I]f you abolish essence, or that which *esse* posits, by that very act you abolish existence, or *esse*.”¹⁰

Beyond this preliminary point about natural philosophy, however, three additional factors help us counter the sensory limit objection. The first is our experience of a wide range of irreducible singularities which transcend the empirical. The second is the role of the free and cognitive acts which characterize our capacity to transcend the material. The third is the very richness of sensation which itself provides for an analysis that, in leading to the metaphysical, can trigger an intuition of being.

IV. IRREDUCIBLE SINGULARITIES

What, for a start, are these irreducible singularities? Consider a rose that attracts our gaze. Through sense perception, and an abstractive process, we know that a rose *is present* to us. But we need to move to the

⁸ Benedict Ashley, *The Way toward Wisdom* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 65-66.

⁹ Jacques Maritain, *The Philosophy of Nature* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1951), 3-4.

¹⁰ Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, trans. Lewis Galantieri and Gerald B. Phelan (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1959), 13.

judgment that the rose *exists*. In making this judgment, we might have an intuition of being, and in various ways.

For the philosopher, perhaps rather an odd sort, the intuition might come in the course of thinking through the structure of judgment. For other people, the sense of self in sensory or intellectual acts might be its catalyst. For some the sheer wonder at an object of grace—a red, red rose—might occasion it. Or perhaps the bloom of the rose calls to mind the vitality of nature, or its fading underscores the passing of time, or its fragility the press of our own anxiety. In each case, we might experience the catalyst for an intuition of being. And for those who do not stop to smell the roses? For such as these we might commend the wonder that there is something rather than nothing. It, too, might trigger an intuition of *esse*. Reflecting on such varied experiences, Maritain finds that it is “on the occasion of some individual reality grasped in its pure singularity” that one might enjoy an intellectual intuition of being.¹¹ This intuitive “leap,” in turn, is an avenue to the structure of the real.

To be candid, many philosophers themselves might never experience an intuition of being. If so, it is unfortunate. After all, it seems that anyone could have such an intuition. A poet is among the more promising candidates. Czeslaw Milosz, for example, writes that we sometimes realize “that what we are seeing, all that reality, is beyond wordsFrom reality which is homely, perceived in a most ordinary way, something else, autonomous and enclosed in language, has come unglued.”¹² Whether poet or plain man, once given an intuition of being, one could by an act of apprehension return to its object. Thus, one could form a *concept* of being; and, by analogy, one could apply it to particular existents.

It falls to the philosopher, however, to articulate and explore the concept of such an intuition. As Maritain notes, “if a child or a poet can

¹¹ Jacques Maritain, *Untrammelled Approaches*, 225. For a sampler of such occasions, see W. Norris Clarke, *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 27-28.

¹² Czeslaw Milosz, *Road-side Dog* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 163.

have...the intuition of being, nevertheless such concepts of abstractive origin, and formed at the third degree of abstraction are proper to the metaphysician."¹³ Here a comparison comes to mind. Even a child, St. Thomas teaches, has some grasp of the ultimate end of every moral act, that is, some grasp of union with God.¹⁴ But the child must yield to the metaphysician for a reflective understanding of what a union with God involves.¹⁵

In any case, while existential singularities are empirical in their inception, they can help us counter the sensory limit objection. The existential impact of such experiences reaches beyond their empirical starting points. Thus, they draw our attention to a range of distinctive experiences that can trigger the intuition of *esse*. But as epiphanic as these varied singularities are, they are perhaps less critical than the everyday free and cognitive acts of the human person. The significance of these everyday and yet extraordinary acts lies in their nature, to which I now turn.

V. FREE AND COGNITIVE ACTS

The second factor to which we turn for help in countering the sensory limit objection builds on the first. Suppose we reflect carefully on our mental acts. Consider, say, taking joy in the richness of existence, including our own, and giving thanks for it. Neither these acts nor their object are reducible to the empirical, unless we are willing to embrace a materialism that evacuates the richness of human subjectivity.¹⁶ We can, moreover, experience such acts with a singular intensity that might trigger the intuition of being. Such acts call into play our human freedom. So, indeed, do all human acts. Nor are we likely to imagine any human experience with more enduring power

¹³ Maritain, *Untrammelled Approaches*, 233.

¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *ST I-II*, q. 89, a. 6 ad 3.

¹⁵ Benedict Ashley, O.P., no friend of the intuition of being, indirectly suggests this comparison. See his *The Way toward Wisdom*, 150.

¹⁶ For an extended argument to this effect, see Peter Geach, "What Do We Think With?," in *God and the Soul* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 30-41.

than the ongoing, day-by-day experience of freedom, most especially in its gradually forming the human character.

St. Thomas, whom we might well consult on the question, does not simply assign the will and the free choices that shape our lives to the sphere of metaphysics; but neither does he assign them to natural philosophy. In the view of Lawrence Dewan, O.P., "The study of the intellect and the will belongs in part to that topmost flight of natural philosophy that considers the human soul, but mostly it belongs to metaphysics."¹⁷ To support his verdict, he directs us to Thomas's *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*. There Thomas comments:

[S]o the last things considered by natural science are forms which are, indeed, in some way separated, but which have existence in matter. [R]ational souls are forms of this sort.... But how forms are totally separated from matter, and what they are, or even how this form, i.e., the rational soul, exists insofar as it is separable and capable of existence without a body and what it is according to its separable essence, are questions which pertain to first philosophy.¹⁸

Thomas, one might add, makes a like observation in his discussion of the division of the sciences.¹⁹

In discussing Thomas's metaphysics of evil, Maritain supports Dewan and does so from a surprising perspective. He reminds us that the Angelic Doctor, in a reference to angelic knowledge, distinguishes between the universe of freedom and the natural world it presupposes. Maritain writes:

¹⁷ Lawrence Dewan, O.P., *Wisdom, Law, and Virtue* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 125.

¹⁸ *Commentary of Aristotle's Physics*, trans. Richard J. Blackwell and Richard J. Spath (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1963), Bk. 2, l. 4 (no. 175).

¹⁹ See Aquinas's *Commentary on Boethius' ON THE TRINITY* in Aquinas, *The Division and Methods of the Sciences: Questions v and vi of his Commentary on the De Trinitate of Boethius*, translated by Armand Maurer, 4th revised edition (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1986), v, 2 ad 7.

[I]t is because of this distinction that St. Thomas teaches that the free act as such, being not of this world, is beyond the grasp of the natural knowledge of the angels (to which, however, is due everything of *this world* considered as God's work of art; for the free act is not a part of *this world*, but of an original universe of its own, the universe of freedom.)²⁰

Angelic Doctor, indeed!

Given their distinctive nature, then, might we not see these free choices of ours as forming a personal path to the unrestrictedly real? To be sure, we cannot divorce human freedom from our sensory operations or from the empirical. But the data of the senses are *preconditions* for the exercise of our freedom. Freedom itself begins with an act of the will, a power of the soul. This act of the will, moreover, does not depend on the data of the senses as constant concomitants.

Such an act of the will does, of course, require that one has the intellectual power to distinguish among various possible actions. It is notable, then, that neither does Thomas assign our intellectual acts to natural philosophy. In their distinctive nature, they also seem to form a personal path to the unrestrictedly real. Cognizing, of course, is an act of the intellect, itself a power of the soul. Yes, nothing is in the intellect without first being in the senses. But sensation is not intellection. Nor do our cognitive acts depend on sensory data as constant concomitants. Often, as experience shows, we need to suppress sense data that either impedes us from acting freely or from thinking clearly.

Of course, we couldn't know that we act freely and intelligently without a sensory grasp of our actions. But free and cognitive acts have a reality that goes beyond that of sense reception. This reality differs sharply, we know, from that of a mathematical abstraction, a mere *ens rationis*; such abstractions *do nothing*.²¹ In contrast, each free and

²⁰ Jacques Maritain, *St. Thomas and the Problem of Evil* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 1942), 10.

²¹ Of note here is Thomas's broader claim that some things do not by *nature* exist in matter and motion, and "[i]n this way being, substance, potency and act are separate from matter and motion, because they do not depend on them for their existence, unlike the objects of mathematics which can only exist in matter" (*In de Trin.* v, 4).

cognitive act has its own way of existing. Such acts are *not* substances. Yet action is so central to reality that it is a most basic avenue to *what is*. W. Norris Clarke, S.J., sees Thomas's *agere sequitur esse* as recognizing in action "the self-revelation of being."²² Thus our free and cognitive acts play a critical role in expanding the data from which we can form a concept of *esse* that transcends the physical.

Our freedom and intelligence are intertwined. Absent an intellectual grasp of possible states of affairs, we could not act freely or responsibly. We could not shape our lives. Absent free choice, we could not think for ourselves; we could only register our sensations. For us, free and intelligent action is an avenue to transcendence. Our quest for transcendence depends on both a cognitive and volitional capacity to go beyond the present moment.

Again, no free and intelligent human act is itself a substance. But it is through free and intelligent acts that we know the human person.²³ Such acts have their own way of existing; each has its own unity, and we can know each directly. Thus, each act, rightly understood, displays a kind of *habens esse*. When we direct our attention to the "*esses*" of such acts, themselves the objects of intuition, we can form a richer concept of *esse*. It is richer because, in forming it, we are not restricted to drawing from the limited data of physical objects. In light of this fuller process, we can see how the intuition of being begins in a judicative grasp of the "to be," or *esse*, of sensible things; and yet this intuition is not limited in its realization to things wholly restricted to the sensible.

Here we should anticipate an objection of the following sort. The proper objects of the intelligence, insists the critic, are mind-independent material objects. But our volitional and cognitive acts are mind-dependent; their existence depends on intellect and will as powers of the soul. Insofar as one appeals to such acts in order to

²² W. Norris Clarke, *The One and the Many*, 35.

²³ In his *The Way toward Wisdom*, 480, n. 69 and 492, n. 7, Benedict Ashley distinguishes between a substance's having an accidental property and substance as, specifically, "transcendentally relative," thus indicating that relation is "transcendental," i.e., pertaining to a thing as "the thing itself according to its requirements for actual existence and intelligibility." One might equally well speak of free and intelligent action as "transcendental."

initiate metaphysics, one falls into mistaken idealism. We can advance to a study of being as such only by drawing analogies with that way of being with which we are most familiar, that is, physical objects as we experience ourselves in causal relationships with them.

In reply to such a critic, two key points call for attention. The first is that while we could not make sense of our world without the sense experience of the properties of mind-independent material objects, neither could we make sense of our world without our experience of human beings as persons. Such persons, to be sure, are objects of sensory experience insofar as they are physical. But they are experientially distinct from mere material objects in that persons are free and intelligent. Persons, too, are the proper, if often mysterious, objects of our intelligence. Indeed, it is because persons, in their freedom and intelligence, transcend material objects, that political science can never be a natural science—to the chagrin of many of its practitioners.²⁴ The human person, rather, is an epistemic and metaphysical bridge linking the physical with the spiritual. Our distinctive status enables us to mediate between the material universe and its Divine source.²⁵

The second point that calls for attention is that we do not come to understand either efficient or final causality by reflecting on the patterned interchange of mere material objects. Rather, we form our understanding of such causality through the cumulative experience of our personal agency. We experience our own agency before we learn to register descriptive causal patterns. Thus, John Henry Newman writes:

One of the first experiences of an infant is that of his willing and doing; and as time goes on, one of the first temptations of the boy is to bring home to himself the fact of his sovereign arbitrary power, though it be at the price of ...disobedience. And when his parents...begin to restrain him...then he has a second

²⁴ James V. Schall, S.J., made this point in his “Science and Faith” (a paper presented at the American Maritain Association’s Thirtieth Annual International Meeting, Nashville, Tennessee, November 3, 2006).

²⁵ W. Norris Clarke highlights this mediation in his *The One and the Many*, 306. Benedict Ashley notes a like point in his *The Way toward Wisdom*, 197.

series of experiences of cause and effect, and that upon a principle or rule.²⁶

Is there not an Augustinian sobriety in this account of the human learning curve?

Here it is also notable that Benedict Ashley, ever a realist, observes that “for any created mind, the existence of beings is independent of their knowledge of them, except when a creature by a free act of will makes something and hence has a productive knowledge of it, as God has for all creation.”²⁷ Surely here there is an ethical corollary. Are we not, as participants in creative production through our freedom, charged to realize God’s providence through our human prudence?²⁸

VI. BEING AS *HABENS ESSE*

The role of free and intelligent acts in the second response to the sensory limit objection directs us to the realist’s interest in “*habens esse*,” that is, in having a distinct way of being. This interest grows in identifying a third factor to consider in meeting the sensory limit objection. John Knasas, indeed, links his account of how to begin metaphysics with “*habens esse*.” Why suppose, he asks, that we must begin metaphysics by enlisting the immaterial in the range of entities from which we might then grasp the *actus essendi*, the act of being? Might we not, instead, proceed by deepening the analysis that everyday sensation makes possible? As we move from apprehension to judgment, we also move from *ens*, i.e., being, to *habens esse*, i.e., having a distinct way of being. In coming to grasp being as *habens esse*, we will grasp it as act rather than as form. (On this point Knasas notes: “If *esse* were itself a form, it would be existence-neutral, and so judgment would always be

²⁶ John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, ed. I. T. Kerr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 49.

²⁷ Benedict Ashley, *The Way toward Wisdom*, 485, n. 17.

²⁸ St. Thomas finds an etymological link; see *ST II-II*, q. 49, a. 6 ad 1. In his “The Divine Law and the Modern Project,” *Modern Age*, 51, No. 1 (2009): 29-30, Mark Shiffman notes the key connection between God’s providence and human prudence in Rémi Brague’s *The Law of God*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

chasing after reality.”²⁹) The deepening analysis that he proposes might well show that such an act is in principle free from physical limitation. By way of comparison: in natural philosophy, we define the soul in relation to the body; and yet we argue for the immateriality of the soul; in the ascent to metaphysics, we begin with sense experience and its objects, and yet we need not limit ourselves to the objects of sense experience in deepening our understanding of being.

This deepening analysis might itself serve as the catalyst of an intuition of being. Wonderment prompts philosophy, and finding joy in sheer existence is the realist’s birthright. Such reflection on the *actus essendi* might well lead us beyond physical determinants to the self-subsistent. In support of such a deepening analysis of what sensation offers, Knasas cites Thomas on the historical steps that led to metaphysics: the analysis of being as this or that sensible body, its further analysis in terms of form and matter, and lastly a consideration of the cause of being as being, regardless of any determinant aspect.³⁰ The proposed third factor, then, for meeting the sensory limit objection is that we can indeed deepen our grasp of the sensible to reveal a dynamic that escapes the limits of the sensible.

VII. A QUESTION RENEWED

The three considerations I’ve sketched—the role of irreducible singularities, the transcendence of free and intelligent acts, and an understanding of being as *habens esse*, regardless of any determinant aspect—give us reason to think that the sensory limit objection is not persuasive. The thesis that there is an intuition of being at the core of metaphysics remains a promising and provocative one.

That thesis, of course, faces other objections. Some critics are skeptical about *any* appeal to intuition, but without intuitive knowledge discursive reasoning simply cannot get a start. Some are skeptical about the veridical character of sense perceptions that precede abstraction and judgment, but without the shared reality such perceptions provide one falls into solipsism. Still others, of an analytic bent, argue that the supposed act of being, *actus essendi*, rests on a

²⁹ Knasas, *Being and Some Twentieth-Century Thomists*, 212.

³⁰ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 44, a 2.

logical muddle about instantiation. But arguably their case depends on a Fregean refusal to define existence for individuals.³¹ Perhaps, then, these further objections are less formidable than many suppose. If so, Jacques Maritain's signature thesis about the intuition of being more than holds its own as a worthy *questio disputata*—and, in our time, a pressing one.

Both the personalist and the Thomist, after all, will want to underscore the import of the intuition of being, initiated by our experience of free and intelligent agency, for the moral life. Given the convertibility of transcendentals, moreover, this intuition leads to both the *ratio entis* and the *ratio boni*. To grasp the *esse* of the person is to become open to the dignity of the person and, in turn, the ground for a culture of life. Nor need this life be merely temporal. For personhood, shown in our creativity, makes us *capax Dei*. In our creativity, we confront the most revealing analogate of the analogon that is *ipsum esse subsistens*, in time revealed as the Trinitarian *communio personarum*.³² As Karol Wojtyła writes, “[we] are creators because we think,” and in creating “we also fill the external material world around us with our own thought and being.” To this he adds, “there is a certain similarity here between ourselves and God, for the whole of creation is an expression of God's own thought and being.”³³

³¹ See Gyula Klima, “On Kenny on Aquinas on Being: A Critical Review of *Aquinas on Being* by Anthony Kenny,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 44 (2004): 567-80.

³² John F. X. Knasas brings together the elements of this grounding in his *Being and Some Twentieth-Century Thomists*, 248.

³³ Karol Wojtyła, “Thomistic Personalism,” in *Person and Community*, 171-72.