



Mark K. Spencer

## The Flexibility of Thomistic Metaphysical Principles: Byzantine Thomists, Personalist Thomists, and Jacques Maritain

Challenges to Thomistic metaphysics' ability to adequately account for the full range of human experience have arisen from many quarters, from St. Thomas' own day to our own. As we will see in this paper, these challenges have included the objections that Thomas' metaphysical principles are inconsistent with the best accounts of our experience of divine action in our lives and of our own subjectivity. Those committed to defending and using Thomistic metaphysics have generally responded to such objections in one of two ways. First, some have regarded defending the letter of Thomas' texts as a primary mark of what it is to be a Thomist.<sup>1</sup> Those who take this line generally argue that the metaphysical principles that Thomas posits, as he describes them, are adequate to account for the phenomena under discussion. Second, others have

---

Mark K. Spencer, University of St. Thomas, USA  
spen8444@stthomas.edu • ORCID: 0000-0002-8829-9697

<sup>1</sup> On this trend, see Jorge J.E. Gracia, "Thomas, Thomists, and the Nature of Metaphysics: A Response to Delfino," in *What are We to Understand Gracia to Mean*, ed. Robert Delfino (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 89.



argued that, while drawing principles and inspiration from Thomas, we should be willing to revise or augment his claims in order to remain true to his fundamental *realist* bent—that is, in order to primarily remain committed to accounting for real being in its entirety.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I consider the contemporary relevance of two schools of Thomism which take the latter approach. ‘Byzantine Thomism’ names a group of Greek thinkers of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries who looked to both Thomas Aquinas and Gregory Palamas as authorities. ‘Personalist Thomism’ names some Catholic thinkers of the last century who seek to synthesize traditional Thomism with phenomenological personalism. Both present us with an opportunity for reflecting on how much the Thomist should be willing to revise Thomistic claims in order to account for real being as well as possible. While I endorse the view of both schools that the Thomist should be willing to revise or augment Thomas’ claims, I also argue here that several of Thomas’ metaphysical principles already have “flexibility” built into them, such that they can accommodate ways that reality is given in experience, which Thomas did not consider. Thomas leaves his account of metaphysical principles general enough that this account can be made more precise in ways that he may not have anticipated, but which he did not positively exclude.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> On this trend, see, e.g., Christiaan Kappes, “The Latin Sources of the Palamite Theology of George[i]Gennadius Scholarius,” in *When East Met West: The Reception of Latin Theological and Philosophical Thought in Late Byzantium: Acts of the Institute of Classical Studies International Byzantine Colloquium, London, 11–12 June 2012*. eds. John A. Demetracopoulos and Charalambos Dendrinos (2013): 72–74; Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 76; Karol Wojtyła, “Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being,” in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Theresa Sandok (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 209–217.

<sup>3</sup> This paper builds on the account that I developed and defended in Mark K. Spencer, “The Flexibility of Divine Simplicity: Aquinas, Scotus, Palamas,”

I first present two interrelated challenges to the claims of traditional Thomism. I then consider how Byzantine and Personalist Thomists solved these challenges, focusing especially on their commitment to realism and on the metaphysical principles that they introduce in support of that commitment. In support of those schools' claims, and to advance my contention that Thomistic principles already have the flexibility required to be open to the claims of other realist schools of thought, I close by drawing some lessons from Jacques Maritain. If Thomism is to have a larger impact on contemporary thought, it would do well to learn from these schools' realist commitments and desire to synthesize Thomism with the claims of other schools of thought. This paper is not an original piece of scholarship on any of the historical figures mentioned in it. Rather, I show how these thinkers' claims can be synthesized in support of seeing the flexibility and openness of Thomistic metaphysics.

### **Two Challenges to Thomistic Metaphysics**

The challenges to Thomistic metaphysics with which I am interested here mostly have to do with the principles involved in divine and human spiritual—that is, intellectual and volitional—acts, and with our experience of those acts. First, there is the challenge, often raised by thinkers in the Byzantine tradition, of showing how divine simplicity is consistent with divine free action. According to Thomas, God is

---

*International Philosophical Quarterly* 57 (2017): 123–139; and in *The Irreducibility of the Human Person: A Catholic Synthesis* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2022). cf. James Dominic Rooney, “Classical Theists Are Committed to the Palamite Essence–Energies Distinction,” in *Classical Theism: New Essays on the Metaphysics of God*, eds. Robert Koons and Jonathan Fuqua (New York: Routledge, 2022).

simple—everything that can be ascribed to Him is really identical to the pure, necessary actuality that He is. God is the ultimate cause and explanation for all things, and so is causally and explanatorily prior to all other things. For this reason, God must contain all perfections found in creatures, such that he lacks all imperfection, so that he can cause perfections in others. God must also lack any composition, internal distinctions, or potentiality that would require explanation or actualization by a prior unity, perfection, or actuality, since nothing is prior to God. This excludes from God composition out of form and matter, essence and existence, substance and accident, and so on, since each of these involve composition *out of* parts that are prior to the whole that they compose, and each of these involve the composed subject having a principle (like matter) that requires actualization by some higher principle, neither of which can be in God, the first principle of all things.<sup>4</sup>

But in this view, God also freely performs contingent acts of willing when He creates this contingent world.<sup>5</sup> The challenge goes as follows.<sup>6</sup> If those acts are identical to God's pure simple necessary actuality, then they too would be necessary; hence, they would not be free. But, if they are not identical to the pure actuality that He is, then either they add an accident to God or they are entirely outside Him. If they are accidents, then God is not simple, but has multiple actualities in Himself. If they are entirely outside of Him—for example, if His acts of knowing and willing creatures are actually relations inhering in creatures—then it is hard to see how they make any difference to

---

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (hereafter, *ST*) I q. 2. All works of Aquinas are cited from [www.corpusthomicum.org](http://www.corpusthomicum.org).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Aquinas, I q. 19.

<sup>6</sup> This challenge is best summed up by David Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 221–262.

God's *conscious experience*. To say that a being has conscious experience is to say that there is something that it is like subjectively (or from the first-person point of view) to be the subject of that experience, and that the subject of experience has awareness of some intentional object. It is not to imply that the subject undergoes changes or gains new information in having an experience.<sup>7</sup> Conscious acts belong, in some way, to the ones who perform or experience them. God would seem, in that view, to be exactly the same—and, so, it would seem to follow, He would have the same conscious experience—whether He creates or not. It is difficult to see how, in that view, he really, literally *loves* or *knows* you or me, since to love or to know, on any coherent understanding of those terms, involve first-personal awareness of the known or loved object.. Hence, God really, consciously performing free acts towards His creatures—and the experience of God's presence to us that seems to result from those acts, which people frequently have, as attested to, for example, in Scripture—seems incompatible with the Thomistic account of divine simplicity.

Traditional Thomists—who, in addition to holding other metaphysical positions, take act and potency to be the fundamental metaphysical principles, and hold that all creatures fit into the ten Aristotelian categories—have attempted to solve this problem in a range of ways.<sup>8</sup> Some, like Thomas Cajetan, posited variable features of God's pure actuality, which he called "free perfections."<sup>9</sup> In this view, when God wills or knows creatures, new perfections which are neither accidental

---

<sup>7</sup> 'Experience' is used here in a more contemporary sense; it should not be taken to be equivalent to Thomas' *'experimentum'*. See Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio libri Posteriorum Analyticorum*, lib. 2, lect. 20, n. 11.

<sup>8</sup> These positions are exemplified, for example, in the 24 Theses put out in 1914 by the Vatican's Sacred Congregation of Studies.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas de Vio Cajetan, *Commentaria in summa theologiae*, v. 4, q. 19, a. 2–3 (Rome: S. C. de Propaganda Fide, 1888), 233–237.

actualizations nor extrinsic to God's pure actuality are added to Him. This was almost universally rejected by other Thomists as inconsistent with the claim that everything in God is identical to the one necessary, pure actuality He is. If God takes on contingent "free" perfections, then it would seem that God must have potencies that can be actualized in distinct, contingent ways—and, so, God would not be simple. Other Thomists held a range of views on divine action.<sup>10</sup> For most Thomists, the being of divine activities is identical to God. But everything variable and contingent in free divine actions that intend actual creatures, like the variable features of knowing or willing this or that actual creature, is real only in creatures. In God, the variable, contingent features of divine actions regarding actual creatures are only relations of reason—relations posited by our minds, but not really existing in Him, though they have a foundation in His being, which is identical to his power and his eternal act of knowing and willing Himself, features of God generally taken by Thomists to ground his acts intending creatures.<sup>11</sup> But, as already argued, this seems inconsistent with holding that He consciously knows or wills creatures, in any sense analogous to the acts we perform. Cajetan's view seems inconsistent with straightforward Aristotelian metaphysics; other Thomist views seem inconsistent with the Christian tradition's account of God as consciously involved in creatures' lives.

---

<sup>10</sup> For a complete survey of Thomistic views on divine action, in which at least five distinct views held by different Thomists are distinguished, see my paper with W. Matthews Grant, "Activity, Identity, and God: A Tension in Aquinas and His Interpreters," *Studia Neoaristotelica* 12 (2015): 5–61.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 13, a. 7; q. 14, a. 5–6. For versions of the majority Thomistic views, see, e.g., John of St. Thomas, *Cursus theologicus*, v. 2, *In Primam partem D. Thomae*, q. 19, d. 4, a. 4, n. 16 (Lyon: Borde, Arnaud, Borde, and Barbier, 1673), 122; Salmanticenses, *Cursus theologicus*, v. 2, *De voluntate dei*, d. 7, dub. 1, s. 1, (Paris: Victor Palmé, 1876), 102–103.

A second challenge focuses on whether Thomistic metaphysics can account for *our* subjective interiority or irreducible first-person awareness of ourselves; since this is a directly given feature of reality, a realist metaphysics should be able to account for it. Some philosophers in the Byzantine tradition, like Christos Yannaras, have argued that Thomistic metaphysics reduces all human acts to aspects that can be defined objectively or in third-person terms, but lacks a place for subjective experiences of participating *as persons* in the cosmos and in God.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, many Western Personalists, even Thomistic ones like Karol Wojtyła, have objected to Thomists' tendencies to seek a rational definition or description and objective categorization for all features of reality. They contend that subjective interiority is accessible only from a first-person point of view. As such, it is real but cannot be defined objectively—that is, it cannot be defined in such a way that the definition would allow us to grasp *what* subjective interiority *is* from a purely third-person, exterior, or public point of view. Rather, in either view, Thomistic metaphysics must be amended or expanded to include categories (that is, fundamental kinds) of being that are exclusively accessible from the first-person point of view.<sup>13</sup>

Thomists who have sought to find a place for subjectivity in Thomistic metaphysics, like Therese Cory, have pointed to Thomas' account of how spiritual acts are “self-present” and “reflexive.” They both intend an extrinsic object and turn back upon themselves, which leads to self-awareness.<sup>14</sup> But while this is an attempt to account for subjective interiority, it still explains self-awareness precisely in terms of objectively definable categories, like relations. As with the tradi-

---

<sup>12</sup> Christos Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, trans. Norman Russell (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007), 194, 210–20.

<sup>13</sup> Wojtyła, “Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being,” 209–217.

<sup>14</sup> Therese Scarpelli Cory, *Aquinas on Human Self-Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

tional response to the first problem, directly given features of the phenomenon that need explaining are actually left out of this account, in an attempt to fit the phenomenon into traditional metaphysical categories.

## **The Response of Byzantine Thomism**

Having presented these challenges and the potential deficiencies with traditional Thomistic answers to them, I now turn to the Byzantine Thomist solution to the first challenge. First, I must say a bit about this school in itself. Byzantine Thomism arose in the fourteenth century in connection with controversies over the metaphysical theology of St. Gregory Palamas. Some medieval Byzantine Thomists, like Demetrios and Prochoros Kydones, used the texts of St. Thomas to argue against Palamas. But others, like Theophanes of Nicaea, Manuel Palaiologos, and especially George Gennadios Scholarios, synthesized Palamite and Thomistic claims. When I refer to Byzantine Thomism, I mean this latter, synthetic school, to which attention has been called recently, for example, by John Demetracopoulos, Christiaan Kappes, and Marcus Plested.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> My account of Byzantine Thomism and of these figures' views is drawn from: John Demetracopoulos, "Palamas Transformed. Palamite Interpretations of the Distinction between God's 'Essence' and 'Energies' in Late Byzantium," in *Greeks, Latins, and Intellectual History 1204–1500*, eds. Martin Hinterberger and Chris Schabel (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 263–372; Christiaan Kappes, "Latin Sources of the Palamite Theology of George-Gennadius Scholarius"; Christiaan Kappes, "A Provisional Definition of Byzantine Theology *Contra* 'Pillars of Orthodoxy'?" *Nicolaus: Rivista di Teologia Ecumenico-Patristica* 40 (2013): 187–202; Christiaan Kappes, J. Isaac Goff, and T. Alexander Giltner, "Palamas Among the Scholastics," *Logos: A Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 55 (2014): 175–220; Marcus Plested, *Orthodox Readings of Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 63–126.



In Palamas' view, all beings, just insofar as they are beings, manifest themselves as the kinds of beings that they are. In each being, there is a distinction between that which is manifested when the being manifests itself—its essence (*ousia*)—and the manifestations of that essence—its activities (*energeiai*).<sup>16</sup> *Energeiai* manifest *ousia*; each being has *energeiai* typical of the kind of being it is in virtue of its *ousia*. The distinction between *ousia* and *energeiai* is justified, for example, by experiences of beings, including God and human beings, manifesting themselves, and by experiences of being able to experientially participate in other beings' activities, for example, when we share in God's charity. When we experience a being manifesting itself, or when we share in another being's activities, that being does not exhaust itself in manifesting or sharing itself. Rather, even as we experience the other being, it also transcends itself; it really manifests itself to us, and it really continues to exist beyond that manifestation. The former is accounted for by its *energeiai*, the latter by its *ousia*. Both belong to what it is to be a being. As the supreme being, and as one in Whom we can participate experientially (that is, in a first-person or subjectively aware way), God too includes both *ousia* and *energeia* in the one simple (i.e., non-composite) being that He is. Beings are not composed from *ousia* and *energeiai*. For a being to be composed is for there to be parts in that being out of which it is made, such that they are causally or explanatorily prior to that being.<sup>17</sup> But *ousia* and *energeia* are not parts and are

---

<sup>16</sup> My account of Palamas' metaphysics is drawn from his texts: *The Triads*, trans. Nicholas Gendle (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1983), 80–107; "Topics of Natural and Theological Science and on the Moral and Ascetic Life: 150 Texts," in *The Philokalia*, v. 4, ed. G. E. H. Palmer, et al. (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 378–417; *Dialogue between an Orthodox and a Barlaamite*, trans. Rein Ferwerda (Binghamton: Episteme, 1999); "On Divine and Deifying Participation," trans. Kirsten H. Anderson, *Analogia: The Pemptousia Journal for Theological Studies* 4 (2017–2018): 5–26. See also Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West*, c. 8–10; Yannaras, *Person and Eros*.

<sup>17</sup> See Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia libri Metaphysicae*, lib. 5, lect. 7.

not prior to their being; rather, they belong to the structure of being as such. A being's *ousia* is what it is; a being's *energeia* is its manifestation. Every being has content that explains what it is, and every being manifests itself and manifests what it is.

Hence, as Palamas and his followers affirm, God is entirely simple, yet this is consistent with God having distinct *ousia* and *energeiai*.<sup>18</sup> We grasp that God has *energeiai* by coming to be aware of how we share in His life and how He reveals Himself to us. We grasp that God has *ousia* by being aware that, as with any being, there is something that it is to be God, in virtue of which all His acts are divine. Furthermore, since we have good reason to think that God is a free being, some of His *energeiai* must be free and, so, contingent.

Byzantine Thomists seek to meet the first challenge, the one regarding contingent divine action, by bringing together Thomistic and Palamite metaphysical accounts of God. (The Palamite account of *energeiai* may be able to help solve the second, Personalist objection too, since, as we saw in the last section, contemporary Palamites, like Yannaras, argue that at least some *energeiai* cannot be rationally or objectively defined, but must be grasped by experiencing them from within.) If every being as such intrinsically includes both *ousia* and *energeia*, then God can be both simple and free. He is simple because He is not composite and because He is identical to a single actuality or act of being, which intrinsically includes variable acts or manifestations. He is free because He is a spiritual being and so intrinsically includes contingent activities; these manifestations of what God is do not become necessary merely because the *ousia* with which they are

---

<sup>18</sup> Georgios Mantzaridis, "Simplicity of God According to St. Gregory Palamas," in *Triune God: Incomprehensible but Knowable—The Philosophical and Theological Significance of St Gregory Palamas for Contemporary Philosophy and Theology*, ed. Constantinos Athanopoulos (Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2016), 19–27.

one in being, and which they make manifest, is necessary. Neither are they mere relations of reason—that is, relations just posited by human minds to explain things. Rather, they are manifestations of divine *ousia*, and they really and “internally”—and, so, consciously—belong to God. They are not accidents, in the sense of being additional beings or additional perfections over and above the pure perfection that He is; rather, they belong to the very structure of His being as such, and are manifestations of His pure perfection. Finally, they do not involve trying to squeeze variability in God into a metaphysical system which admits only act and potency as the fundamental metaphysical divisions of reality, as Cajetan does with his *ad hoc* positing of “free perfections.”

Rather, in the Byzantine Thomist view, the distinction between *ousia* and *energeiai* is just as foundational to metaphysics as that between act and potency, though the two distinctions are not reducible to each other. For a being to take on *energeiai* is not, *ipso facto*, for that being to take on an accidental operation or actualization. Rather, to take on contingent *energeiai* is just to be made manifest; this only involves accidental actualization if it involves taking on a new perfection, as operations generally do in us. Since God cannot take on new perfections, God’s contingent *energeiai* only involve his perfection being manifested in a new way, not his taking on an accident. *Energeiai* are posited in God as just the divine case of a metaphysical item belonging to being as such.

In addition to holding these Palamite views, the Byzantine Thomists also adopt various claims from Thomas, which they think provide an opening for adding the Palamite claims to his metaphysics. For example, the Byzantine Thomists accept from Thomas the view that predicates ascribed to God are not synonymous and so there is some foundation in God for the distinctions we make among His attribute and acts.<sup>19</sup> Palamas fills in the details as to what that foundation is: while all

---

<sup>19</sup> Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 13, a. 4.

divine attributes are one in being or actuality with each other, they are distinct ways God manifests Himself, and so are to be understood as distinct *energeiai*. Thomas affirms that all the perfections found in creatures are pre-contained in God's unified actuality.<sup>20</sup> Again, Byzantine Thomism sees Palamas' distinction as fleshing out how that pre-containment works: those perfections are all one in being with God, but are the many ways in which He shares Himself with creatures as available to be participated, that is, they are many *energeiai*. Finally, Thomas holds that real distinctions, such as the distinction among the Trinitarian Persons, are compatible with divine simplicity, since they do not add additional, absolute (or non-relational) perfections to God.<sup>21</sup> Byzantine Thomists just affirm another (in some interpretations, real) distinction, that between *ousia* and *energeiai*, as compatible with simplicity.

But some Byzantine Thomists, like Scholarios, use other scholastics' work to bridge the potential metaphysical gap between Thomas and Palamas. Scholarios, in the interpretation of some modern scholars, sees Thomistic divine simplicity as incompatible in itself (that is, as it is literally expressed by Thomas) with the Palamite *ousia-energeia* distinction. He uses John Duns Scotus' and Herveaus Natalis' use of the *formal distinction*—a distinction that is more real than a conceptual distinction, but does not amount to a full real distinction (that is, one involving separability or difference in perfection among the *differentia*)—to account for how one real being can contain, in itself, multiple aspects.<sup>22</sup>

Each of these accounts is a potential solution to the first problem; each one accounts for more features of given reality than the traditional Thomistic view does. But each joining of Western scholastic and Palamite claims presented so far is not clearly a coherent, synthesized

---

<sup>20</sup> Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 4, a. 2.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, q. 28, a. 3.

<sup>22</sup> See the sources cited in note 16 above.

view, but a somewhat *ad hoc* and eclectic view, juxtaposing aspects of views without giving a fully principled, metaphysical synthesis. Their affirmation of all these claims is motivated by their thoroughgoing *realism*, their desire to account for all aspects of reality as it appears to us. But with the introduction of these novel kinds of distinction, one might worry that we have moved away from any grounding in the principles of Thomism—and so that the resulting view is not clearly one the *Thomist* could take up.

### **The Response of Personalist Thomism**

This absence of a fully worked-out synthesis remains if we turn to the way the second challenge has been solved by Personalist Thomism. Personalism emphasizes the irreducibility of persons to anything non-personal, focusing on the importance of subjective or first-person experiences for grasping that irreducibility and for understanding what it is to be a person. They focus not on acts or passions considered objectively as actualities or potentialities inhering in a substance, but on the first-person subjective experience of performing acts, undergoing feelings, and acting with others.<sup>23</sup> Personalist *Thomists* have joined Thomistic and Personalist claims. A representative of such thinkers is Karol Wojtyła. Following traditional Thomism, Wojtyła affirms the foundational status of act, potency, and the ten categories of being.

---

<sup>23</sup> With its emphasis on personal, subjective *energeiai* in an experiential, not rationally definable way, Palamism anticipates some of the claims of Personalism. On possible similarities between Personalism and Palamism, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, v. 5, *The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 408; John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997).

But, in response to the second challenge, Wojtyła seems to posit a new category of being: lived experience. Following the Personalists, he argues that lived or subjective interior experience cannot be objectively defined, as act, potency, and the ten traditional categories are. What it is can and must be grasped only from within. In order to fully grasp all aspects of reality—in order to be truly *realist* philosophers—we must “pause at the irreducible,” at subjective or lived interiority, and account for it in a way distinct from other aspects of being.<sup>24</sup>

Unlike traditional Thomism, which would account for first-person subjective awareness through an objective account of human spiritual acts, noting that these acts aim both at some object and, reflexively, at themselves, this Personalist Thomist account offers a solution to the second challenge that does not deny the very thing it seeks to explain. Subjective experience is not accounted for in terms of objective features of beings. Rather, it is explained as a kind of being in its own right, one that is indefinable and can only be grasped in itself. But while this provides a metaphysical solution to the second challenge, it does so (as with the Palamite solution to the first problem) in a way that will appear to the strict Thomist to be *ad hoc*, merely tacking a new principle onto Thomistic metaphysics, without accounting for how this new category is united to the others.

### **Jacques Maritain on the Interiority of Metaphysical Principles**

We have now seen that Byzantine and Personalist Thomism fit well with Thomism’s *realism*: their attention is on reality as it is given to us, and they posit metaphysical principles to explain that reality. Those

---

<sup>24</sup> Wojtyła, “Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being,” 213.

principles, however, do not fit as well as possible with traditional Thomistic metaphysics. What is needed is an interpretation of Thomistic metaphysics that allows the items posited by Byzantine and Personalist Thomism—*energeiai*, formal distinctions, irreducible subjectivity, and so forth—to be coherently integrated into it. We need to more fully see that Thomistic metaphysical principles, considered in themselves, have the flexibility to accommodate the additions suggested by these later schools of Thomism. Only then will we have a fully integrated, realist, properly Thomistic metaphysics, as opposed to an eclectic juxtaposition of claims from various metaphysics. We find the basis for such an interpretation of Thomistic metaphysical principles at least implicitly in the work of Jacques Maritain, as will be seen from the following three examples.

The first example is found in Maritain's development of Thomas' definition of "person" as an individual substance of a rational nature or an incommunicable existent of an intellectual nature.<sup>25</sup> But Maritain shows that to fulfill these definitions is to have certain subjective aspects. To be incommunicable is not just (as Thomas' texts have it) to be unable to be given over to another as a part is given to a larger whole or a universal to a particular. Rather, as an *intellectual* being who is unable to be given over to another, a person possesses him or herself as that kind of being, that is, as a thinking, reflexive being—in other words, for a person to be incommunicable is to possess oneself *subjectively*. To be intellectual is not just to have a potentiality for objectively definable acts of knowing and willing. Rather, it is to be

---

<sup>25</sup> *ST* I, q. 29, a. 3; *Scriptum super Sententiis*, lib. 3, d. 5, q. 2, a. 1, ad 2. For this account of personhood from Maritain, see *The Person and the Common Good*, trans. John Fitzgerald, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947), chapters 3 and 4. The argument in this paragraph develops the account that I gave in Mark K. Spencer, "Aristotelian Substance and Personalistic Subjectivity," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 55 (2015): 145–164.

subjectively oriented to give oneself thorough knowledge and love out of that spiritual center of existence wherein one possesses oneself. Thomas' own definitions of "person" cannot be fully grasped from without, in the manner of a definition; their full meaning can only be grasped from within, from the first-person standpoint of engaging in acts of possessing and giving oneself. We can draw from Maritain's fleshing out of Aquinas' account of personhood the observation that Thomas' metaphysical principles themselves, fully understood, have not only an exterior, objective, rationally definable side, but also an interior aspect, graspable and describable only from within. Personhood in Thomas' account already has the flexibility to accommodate, within itself, many of the concerns put forward by the Personalist Thomists.

A second, similar example is in Maritain's account of the mystical life. Thomistic metaphysics, which Maritain endorses, explains the acts of love whereby we are united to God in spiritual marriage in terms of acts of our power of will, the intentional relation they bear to their object, and the way in which lover and beloved are in one another by intentional being, as opposed to entitative, real being. To be in another by entitative being is to be actually absorbed into another, that is, to be made a part or property of another. To be in another by intentional being is have one's form or likeness in the other as known or as loved, but to continue existing apart from that other as well. This is an objective account of the relations between the creature and God. But Maritain integrates to this objective, third-person account, an often metaphorical but correct description of our transformation into God from the interior, first-person point of view, based on the claims of the great mystics, such as John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila.<sup>26</sup> Once again, the metaphysical items posited by the scholastics have, in them-

---

<sup>26</sup> Maritain, *Degrees of Knowledge*, 392–408.



selves, an “outside” and an “inside,” an exterior aspect that can be defined objectively and in the terms of traditional metaphysics, and an interior, conscious aspect that cannot be reduced to the objectively-definable side, but that is not really distinct from it either.

A third example is found in Maritain’s aesthetics.<sup>27</sup> In Aquinas’ view, the human intellect includes the power known as the “agent intellect.”<sup>28</sup> When I grasp things through the senses, I take in forms or likenesses of those things, and hold those forms in my internal sense powers; these forms are known as “phantasms.” Through these forms, I am aware of sensible things as particulars. To become aware of things intellectually, as having essences and as falling under universal concepts, I must be able to draw out and actually grasp the potentially intelligible features of sensible things. The power to do this is the “agent intellect,” which illumines and bestows intelligible being on phantasms whose content is to be known, and thereby produces concepts and words by which those phantasms and the sensible beings they represent are actually known. This process can be portrayed in the objective terms of describing the causal processes posited by Thomistic rational psychology. The reflexivity of our intellectual acts, described above, belongs to this level of description. But Maritain adds to this an account of what we discover and are enabled to express by an interior exploration of these acts. When we consider the act of rendering what we have sensed intelligible, we discover a whole interior world of the unconscious. Included in the “light” of the agent intellect—the power to render any sensible form intelligible—are many unconsciously grasped forms. Our unconscious potential grasp on all possible sensible forms affects how our phantasms are rendered intel-

---

<sup>27</sup> Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Poetry and Art* (New York: Pantheon, 1953), chapters 3, 4, and 7.

<sup>28</sup> This account is summarized from Aquinas, *Sententia libri De anima*, book 3, lectios 7–10.

ligible and understood. The varying, subjectively grasped ways in which different persons render phantasms intelligible can be expressed in artworks. Yet again, the objectively, causally, rationally describable metaphysical aspects of us—such as the power and acts of the agent intellect—are themselves intrinsically subjective, with an interior aspect accessible only from a first-person point of view.

### **The Flexibility of Metaphysical Principles**

Maritain's way of presenting the interior and the exterior aspects of human acts, powers, and substance opens up a new way of thinking about the principles posited by Thomistic metaphysics. Those principles are, we might say, *flexible*: we can come to see that those principles themselves, the very principles identified and described by Thomas, include aspects that he and other Thomists did not fully grasp. The fact that Thomism has picked out a feature of reality using a certain principle—say, act or potency—and has historically defined or described that principle in a certain objective way, does not *ipso facto* preclude that very same principle from being described in another, subjective way. St. Thomas did not describe the agent intellect as having a subjectively unconscious aspect—but the given reality that he described with the notion of the agent intellect admits of such a description. He did not describe metaphysical personhood as intrinsically involving subjective self-possession or self-gift, but the description of personhood as *incommunicable* and *intellectual* is flexible enough to be open to being further elucidated in this way.

My claim that Maritain shows the *flexibility* of Thomistic principles, if correct, opens up a way to integrate the Byzantine and Personalist metaphysical claims into traditional Thomistic metaphysics in a more coherently synthesizing way than the members of those school integrated them. This way also allows these schools to be

further developed. The examples drawn from Maritain already show how to integrate the Personalist idea of lived experience into the Thomistic account of being: lived experience is not a distinct category of accident in human persons, but the interior aspect of personhood and of accidents (like powers and acts) inhering in human substances and belonging to the nine traditional Aristotelian categories of accidents. Lived experience or subjectivity is really identical to members of categories posited by traditional Thomists, but a distinct aspect of those beings. The Thomist can salvage the Personalist idea of “pausing at the irreducible” without positing a distinct category of being awkwardly joined to the traditional ten. The Thomist can do this because those traditional categories are not bound to just those aspects that have been traditionally described in them, but they are flexible enough to include a subjective aspect.

In a similar way, the Thomist can integrate Palamite claims into Thomistic metaphysics. Thomas explicates what it is to be a *being as such* in terms of the notions of actuality and the transcendentals (like unity, truth, and goodness).<sup>29</sup> He does not explicitly posit the idea of many formally distinct aspects or many *energeiai* in a being, one in being with it, but neither does he deny this possibility.<sup>30</sup> Rather, he just affirms that everything ascribable to being as such is really identical to it and conceptually distinct from it. That is consistent with aspects of being also being formally distinct or distinct in other ways. Thomas just does not address the possibility of items being distinct from one another in those ways. I contend that, given that he does not exclude the possibility and given his realist orientation, his account of being should be regarded as flexible enough to be open to this addition, if

---

<sup>29</sup> For example, at *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate* (hereafter, *DV*), q. 1, a. 1.

<sup>30</sup> The Palamite distinction is not exactly the formal distinction, since when a being, in Duns Scotus' view, has many formalities in itself, they are all necessary for that being to exist, but many *energeiai* in beings are contingent.

this addition is warranted by the way reality is given, or by the need to solve challenges left unsolved in other metaphysics.

As we saw in considering Byzantine Thomism's account of God above, Thomas holds that many of the distinctions we conceptually make about beings are grounded in facts about those beings in themselves. He also shows, by the variations in the lists of the transcendentals that he posits, that his account of being is meant to be open to the possibility that there are more aspects of being that he has not explicitly posited. For example, at times he includes just unity, truth, and goodness on this list;<sup>31</sup> at other times, he includes properties like *res* and *aliquid* on lists of properties belonging to all beings;<sup>32</sup> and in still other places, he suggests that beauty or multitude are transcendentals or properties of all beings.<sup>33</sup> Since, on his view, every being is true and good—that is, it is apt to be known and desired, apt to come together (*convenire*) with minds and wills<sup>34</sup>—it follows that, on his view, every being manifests itself and is active. The Palamite distinction between *ousia* and *energeia* can be understood as an elaboration on the internal structure of being insofar as it has these transcendentals. Each being has an essence and includes events or activities of self-manifestation, in which it manifests itself to other beings' intellects and wills as the kind of being it is. While Thomas understands the transcendentals truth and goodness to be relations of reason,<sup>35</sup> this must be rightly understood. A *relation of reason* is, fundamentally, a relation that does not involve real dependence on another and does not add any perfection or accidental actuality to the related being, whereas a real relation involves dependence on another.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Aquinas, *DV*, q. 21, a. 1.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, q. 1, a. 1.

<sup>33</sup> Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 5, a. 4, ad. 1; q. 30, a. 3.

<sup>34</sup> Aquinas, *DV*, q. 1, a. 1.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, q. 21, a. 1.

<sup>36</sup> See Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 13, a. 7; q. 45, a. 3.

But on this account, the category of “relation of reason” is flexible enough to include relations that make a real difference to their foundation, so long as they do not involve any real dependence on another being or any increase in their foundation’s perfection. A divine *energeia*, like an act of freely willing a creature to exist, would count as a “relation of reason” on this account, even though it makes a real difference to God’s conscious experience.<sup>37</sup>

I propose that, as the Byzantine Thomists hinted but did not adequately show, the Palamite distinction between *ousia* and *energeiai* just adds further details to this account of the internal structure of being.<sup>38</sup> To be a being is to include acts of self-manifestation, in accord with the kind of thing one is. But this is to say that to be a being is to include multiple *energeiai*. Each of the *energeiai* in a being are one in being with that being. As in the dialogue with the Personalists, there is no need to add a new principle beyond those posited by Thomism; what the Palamites provide is just more detail on the internal structure of being or actuality as such. God is pure act, but being pure act includes, internally, *ousia* and free *energeiai*. These are not new perfections in God, over and above the pure act that he is, unlike on Cajetan’s view,

---

<sup>37</sup> Several philosophers in the Jesuit tradition have seen that “relation of reason” is a category flexible enough to include intentional relations and relations of conscious awareness of others, so long as this does not imply any change to God in which He would take on dependence on another or take on new perfections. See Norris Clarke, “A New Look at the Immutability of God,” in *Explorations in Metaphysics: Being-God-Person* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 183–210; Pedro da Fonseca, *In libros metaphysicorum Aristotelis Stagiritae*, c. 8, q. 5, s. 4–5 (Frankfurt: Schanauerterti, 1599), v. 2, 382–386.

<sup>38</sup> As Byzantine Thomists like Scholarios point out, in Thomas’ view, God’s one being is identical to multiple distinct real relations—the Persons of the Trinity—and so Thomas’ notion of being is actually flexible enough to include an internal structure involving multiple real relations and real distinctions, another reason to think it can include *energeiai*.

but are aspects of His one, pure actuality. God's *ousia* and *energeiai* are God; they are identical to him, that is, one in being with him.

Byzantine and Personalist Thomism set a fine model for contemporary Thomists in their unswerving commitment to realism. They rightly draw on non-Thomistic schools of thought when these are beneficial for describing aspects of reality. Thomists would do well to emulate their example in this regard. But as Maritain's example shows, there is no need to take these schools to be positing entirely new metaphysical principles, beyond those already posited by Thomism. Rather, they can and should be understood as exploring the flexible internal structure of the already posited Thomistic principles. Because Thomism has this flexibility, we can, through this exchange, see the extraordinary realism already present in the Thomistic principles themselves: the framers of these ideas, as it were, wrought better than they knew, and described the objective features of reality so well, that they left the door open for a description of the subjective and *energeiai* features of those same realities. The Thomistic realist should integrate as much as possible from other schools of thought, if those schools give an advantage for explaining all of reality, but he or she should be confident that the Thomistic system already has what it takes to coherently integrate these new ideas.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2020 conference of the American Maritain Association. I am grateful to Matthew Miner for inviting me to give that talk, and to those who discussed this paper with me there, especially John Crosby, Jim Hanink, and Fr. Christiaan Kappes. I am also grateful to David Bradshaw and Fr. Matthew Kirby for correspondence on the topics of this paper, and to Mary Lemmons and an anonymous referee for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.



## The Flexibility of Thomistic Metaphysical Principles: Byzantine Thomists, Personalist Thomists, and Jacques Maritain

### SUMMARY

Thomistic metaphysics has been challenged on the grounds that its principles are inconsistent with our experiences of divine action and of our own subjectivity. Challenges of this sort have been raised by Eastern Christian thinkers in the school of Gregory Palamas and by contemporary Personalists; they propose alternative metaphysics to explain these experiences. Against these objections and against those Thomists who hold that Thomas Aquinas' claims exclude Byzantine and Personalist metaphysics, I argue that Thomas' metaphysical principles already have "flexibility" built into them, such that they can accommodate ways that reality is given in experience, which Thomas did not consider. I argue for this claim using the work of Byzantine and Personalist Thomists, and especially of Jacques Maritain, who outlines several ways in which Thomistic metaphysical principles can be expanded to explain experiences that he did not consider.

**Keywords:** thomism, Thomas Aquinas, Gregory Palamas, Karol Wojtyła, Jacques Maritain, divine action, divine simplicity, essence-energies distinction, subjectivity, personalism, metaphysics, real and rational distinctions

### REFERENCES

- Aquinas, Thomas. *Opera omnia*. Available at [www.corpusthomicum.org](http://www.corpusthomicum.org). Navarre: Fundación Tomás de Aquino, 2019.
- Balthasar, Hans Urs von. *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, Volume 5: The Last Act*. Translated by Graham Harrison. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998.
- Bradshaw, David. *Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

- Cajetan, Thomas de Vio. *Commentaria in Summa Theologiae*. Volume 4. Rome: S. C. de Propaganda Fide, 1888.
- Clarke, Norris. "A New Look at the Immutability of God." In *Explorations in Metaphysics: Being–God–Person*, 183–210. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994.
- Cory, Therese Scarpelli. *Aquinas on Human Self-Knowledge*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.
- Demetracopoulos, John. "Palamas Transformed. Palamite Interpretations of the Distinction between God's 'Essence' and 'Energies' in Late Byzantium." In *Greeks, Latins, and Intellectual History 1204–1500*. Edited by Martin Hinterberger and Chris Schabel, 263–372. Leuven: Peeters, 2011.
- Gracia, Jorge J. E., "Thomas, Thomists, and the Nature of Metaphysics: A Response to Delfino." In *What are We to Understand Gracia to Mean? Realist Challenges to Metaphysical Neutralism*. Edited by Robert A. Delfino, 89–94. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006.
- Grant, W. Matthews and Mark K. Spencer. "Activity, Identity, and God: A Tension in Aquinas and His Interpreters." *Studia Neoaristotelica* 12 (2015): 5–61.
- John of St. Thomas. *Cursus theologicus in Primam partem D. Thomae*. Volume 2. Lyon: Borde, Arnaud, Borde, and Barbier, 1673.
- Kappes, Christiaan. "The Latin Sources of the Palamite Theology of George-Gennadius Scholarius." In *When East Met West: The Reception of Latin Theological and Philosophical Thought in Late Byzantium: Acts of the Institute of Classical Studies International Byzantine Colloquium, London, 11–12 June 2012*. Edited by John A. Demetracopoulos and Charalambos Dendrinou. (2013): 71–114.
- Kappes, Christiaan. "A Provisional Definition of Byzantine Theology Contra 'Pillars of Orthodoxy'?" *Nicolaus: Rivista di Teologia Ecumenico-Patristica* 40 (2013): 187–202.
- Kappes, Christiaan, J. Isaac Goff, and T. Alexander Giltner, "Palamas Among the Scholastics," *Logos: A Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 55 (2014): 175–220.



- Mantzaridis, Georgios. "Simplicity of God According to St. Gregory Palamas." In *Triune God: Incomprehensible but Knowable—The Philosophical and Theological Significance of St Gregory Palamas for Contemporary Philosophy and Theology*, edited by Constantinos Athanasopoulos, 19–27. Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2016.
- Maritain, Jacques. *The Person and the Common Good*. Translated by John Fitzgerald. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947.
- Maritain, Jacques. *Creative Intuition in Poetry and Art*. New York: Pantheon, 1953.
- Maritain, Jacques. *The Degrees of Knowledge*. Translated by Gerald B. Phelan. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995.
- Palamas, Gregory. *The Triads*. Translated by Nicholas Gendle. Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1983.
- Palamas, Gregory. "Topics of Natural and Theological Science and on the Moral and Ascetic Life: 150 Texts." In *The Philokalia*, Volume Four. Edited by G. E. H. Palmer, et al. London: Faber and Faber, 1995.
- Palamas, Gregory. *Dialogue between an Orthodox and a Barlaamite*. Translated by Rein Ferwerda. Binghamton: Episteme, 1999.
- Palamas, Gregory. "On Divine and Deifying Participation." Translated by Kirsten H. Anderson. *Analogia: The Pemptousia Journal for Theological Studies* 4 (2017–2018): 5–26.
- Pedro da Fonseca. *In libros metaphysicorum Aristotelis Stagiritae*. Frankfurt: Schanauerterri, 1599.
- Plested, Marcus. *Orthodox Readings of Aquinas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Rooney, James Dominic. "Classical Theists Are Committed to the Palamite Essence-Energies Distinction." In *Classical Theism: New Essays on the Metaphysics of God*. Edited by Robert Koons and Jonathan Fuqua. New York: Routledge, 2022.
- Sacred Congregation of Studies. *24 Thomistic Theses*. Rome, 1914.
- Salmanticenses. *Cursus Theologicus. Volume 2. De Voluntate Dei*. Paris: Victor Palmé, 1876.

- Spencer, Mark K. "Aristotelian Substance and Personalistic Subjectivity." *International Philosophical Quarterly* 55 (2015): 145–164.
- Spencer, Mark K. "The Flexibility of Divine Simplicity: Aquinas, Scotus, Palamas." *International Philosophical Quarterly* 57 (2017): 123–139.
- Spencer, Mark K. *The Irreducibility of the Human Person: A Catholic Synthesis*. Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2022.
- Wojtyła, Karol. "Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being." In *Person and Community: Selected Essays*. Translated by Theresa Sandok, 209–217. New York: Peter Lang, 1993.
- Yannaras, Christos. *Person and Eros*. Translated by Norman Russell. Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007.
- Zizioulas, John. *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*. Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997.