



# FAITH & REASON

THE JOURNAL OF CHRISTENDOM COLLEGE

Summer 2001 | Vol. XXVI, No. 2

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## RICHARD MCBRIEN'S CATHOLICISM AND THE METHODOLOGY OF TRANSCENDENTAL THOMISM

*John F. X. Knasas*

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CATHOLIC THEOLOGY HAS ALWAYS RECOGNIZED THAT TO BE RECEPTIVE TO GOD'S word, the human person needs to be properly disposed. After all, not all who witnessed the miracles of Jesus believed. Some had eyes to see, some did not. Traditionally, this subjective requirement has gone under the designation of the *praeambulae fidei*, the preambles of the faith. Included among the preambles, for example, would be God's unicity and spirituality. Unless a person was open to these characterizations of God, that person would be unreceptive to the faith. For instance, an entrenched materialist is going to be closed to divine revelation. The most famous case of someone with this stumbling block is, of course, St. Augustine. His inability to see even the possibility of a spiritual being prevented him from returning to the religion in which he was baptized. In his famous work, the *Confessions*, Augustine relates that it was his encounter with Platonic philosophy that brought him over this hurdle, even though it did not yet convert him.<sup>1</sup>

The traditional importance of the *praeambulae fidei* is emphasized in Richard McBrien's popular work, *Catholicism*.<sup>2</sup> One especially sees this in his discussion in chapter seven of revelation. Trying to avoid the excessive immanentism of Modernism and the excessive extrinsicism of a decadent Scholasticism, McBrien says that *we* make an event speak of God. God is not self-revealing. This means not only that God always makes himself present through something else (for instance, a person or an event); it also means that the presence of God in the something else is known, that is, the something else takes on the character of the mysterious and sacramental, only through our making it so. We bring something to the object of experience that is responsible for the object appearing in the way it does. In sum, McBrien says, "There are at least two levels of mediation: the person or the event which mediates (the symbol), and the interpretation of what is mediated."<sup>3</sup>

What distinguishes McBrien's treatment of revelation is that he gives the subjective factors a transcendental twist. According to McBrien, these factors, the *praeambulae*, are innate and indigenous to the human person in the fashion of a Kantian transcendental category. The *praeambulae* are not generated in the human intellect from its experience of sensible things. They are not *a posteriori*, as was the case in the mainstream Thomistic tradition. Rather, they are *a priori*; they are in the intellect before any experience of sensible things, and they are used to interpret those things. In sum, McBrien says,

A person, an event, a natural phenomenon is perceived as mysterious or sacramental, i.e., as bearing and mediating the presence of God, only insofar as it actualizes our innate capacity for God. It is known by what Aquinas called 'knowledge by connaturality'.<sup>4</sup>

The first edition of *Catholicism* put it even more strikingly. An item was perceived as bearing the presence of God "only insofar as it rings true to one's innate sense of God."<sup>5</sup>

Actually, a case can be made that McBrien's transcendental twist to the praeambulae is quite traditional. Both Augustine and Bonaventure seem to speak of something similar. In his proof for God in his *De Libero Arbitrio*, Augustine speaks of an intelligible context in which we apprehend particular immutable truths like those of ethics, mathematics and logic. This context seems to function like a transcendental *a priori*.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Bonaventure in his first way of proving God in his *De Mystero Trinitatis* argues that our dissatisfaction with mutable and finite things bespeaks a love of the eternal and all-perfect. But since there cannot be love without knowledge, then we must also have a knowledge of the eternal and all-perfect.<sup>7</sup> This knowledge that Bonaventure teases out of our dissatisfaction with the temporal can also be construed as a transcendental *a priori* factor in the human subject.

But as a basis for his position McBrien appeals to the neoThomist tradition of Transcendental Thomism.<sup>8</sup> In that tradition, what McBrien calls our “radical openness to divine revelation” and “our innate capacity for God” is expressed in terms of intellectual dynamism. In a previously published article,<sup>9</sup> I criticized the understanding of intellectual dynamism held by Marechal, Rahner and Lonergan. I wish here to take advantage of some of the reflections of that article to illustrate a fatal flaw in McBrien's theological methodology. In sum, the transcendental twist given to the praeambulae makes knowledge of revelation impossible because it makes knowledge of anything impossible.

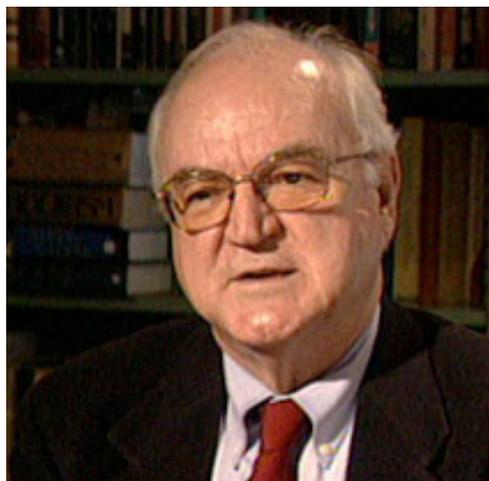
Let me explain. “All men by nature desire to know.” This arresting remark at the opening of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is susceptible to two interpretations. In the first, reality awakens or ignites the desire to know. Reality provokes the wonder that seeks the knowledge to remove the ignorance. For example, learning from experience that dead pieces of wood do not move themselves, one naturally wonders about the cause of motion in marionettes. According to this first interpretation of Aristotle's words, humans have by nature a tendency to remove ignorance when reality presents previously known effects apart from their previously known causes. Questioning is not spontaneous but is pro-

voked or primed by the data; it arises *a posteriori*.

According to a second interpretation, no need exists for reality to prime the intellect. Rather, the desire to know is indigenous and connatural to the intellect. The intellect, so to speak, hits the deck running. Transcendental Thomists exploit this second interpretation. The intellect's desire to know is *a priori*. It is not generated by experience but precedes it. Yet in sympathy with transcendental philosophy, they move beyond this. Despite inevitable idiosyncrasies (viz., for Marechal intellectual dynamism is for Infinite Being, for Rahner it is for absolute esse, for Lonergan it is for the notion of being), all these men agree that the desire to know is not some adjunct feature of human consciousness. It does not inhabit the peripheries of human consciousness. Rather, it is understood as a constitutive factor of it. Intellectual dynamism for an infinite object is the context for all other activities, e.g., sensation, imagination, conceptualization, and judgment. Another way of saying this is that for Transcendental Thomists intellectual dynamism is a mediating context or matrix for the appearance of things as finite beings. Speaking of intellectual dynamism, McBrien himself says, “Our radical capacity for God (which God has implanted in us as part of our historical human nature) makes possible our knowledge and our freedom.”<sup>10</sup>

But now we come to the nub of the problem. We are familiar with other mediating contexts that make a difference in how the object appears, viz., the object looks one way outside the context and another way within it. For example, biases and prejudices can determine how things come across. In the light of a racial prejudice, bigots are unable to appreciate something done in good faith by a black person. A black person's smile or

courtesy will be taken as a “set up,” his unemployment as indicative of a lazy character, his employment as indicative of someone's mercy rather than his own merit, etc. The bigot constantly interprets events in the light of his preconceptions. But given this awareness of how contexts can function, is it illegitimate to wonder if what is called the *a priori* dynamism of the intellect is not like a bias, is not like a matrix that is posing the object in a way different than it is outside the framework?



Richard McBrien

Transcendental Thomists are sensitive to this concern and try to address it. Their defense is called the performative self-contradiction or retortion defense. Basically the logic works like this: any attempt to doubt the framework employs the framework and so nullifies itself. For example, the thought of things possibly outside the framework, if looked at closely, remains the thought of those things within the framework. In other words, real doubt of the framework presupposes the ability to stand apart mentally from the framework. But this is impossible. Hence, one can conclude that the framework is objective.

My reply is that retortion misses the basis for the skeptic's doubt. The skeptic is not saying that the ultimate context might be revealing the data as other than it is because the skeptic can in some way transcend the context. The ultimate context can be admitted as ineluctible. Rather, if the skeptic's objection is closely studied, his case for possible distortion rests not on the eluctibility of the context but upon a familiarity with less fundamental or less encompassing ones. It is not by a look ahead that the skeptic's question arises but by a look back. The look back to less encompassing contexts acquaints the skeptic with the idea of something standing outside a context and the idea of the context placing the thing in a different light. Contexts can be limited and distortive. The skeptic naturally and correctly, in my opinion, wonders if such is the case with *a priori* intellectual dynamism. Why may not it be actually limited too?

Retortion, then, is indecisive. The ineluctability of the context that retortion indicates is a phenomenon that could quite well follow simply from the fundamentality of the context. The ineluctibility of the context is not an exclusive property following upon the objectivity of the context. Given what the skeptic knows of what can be true of contexts, retortion could quite well be indicating merely how we have to think rather than the way reality is. The "screeching" of performative self-contradiction could quite well indicate a grinding of merely mental gears and not any manhandling of reality.

The second logical step is as follows. It is sometimes said that no doubt about the objectivity of the context should exist because the Transcendental Thomist admits and insists that the knower initially apprehends really existing things. This admission is then used to guarantee the objectivity of any mediating factors that he subsequently uncovers. In short, the mediating factor

must be objective because the knower is apprehending real things.

But this second move has the tail wagging the dog. If the Transcendental Thomist insists on introducing a genuine constitutive *a priori* or mediating context, then given what I have said can be true of mediating contexts, the knower is not permitted to make any assertions about the objectivity of the thing mediated until the objectivity of the mediating context itself has been examined. In other words, the introduction of a mediating context compromises any previous realist claims. These must be placed on hold until the objectivity of the mediating context has been verified—something that, in my opinion, cannot be done.



The traditional Thomist who proceeds to uncover the variegated structure of the human knower does not have this problem of placing realist assertions on hold. Yes, he too begins the analysis from an immediate realism, but nowhere in his analysis as it uncovers sense and intellectual faculties does the traditional Thomist introduce items the nature of which could be construed as a constitutive *a priori* or mediating context. The faculties are all more like key holes that admit some keys but not others. They are unlike a pencil sharpener that can modify what it admits. But the latter does analogically describe what is the case with the Transcendental Thomist constitutive understanding of the knowing faculties.<sup>11</sup>

Even the traditional doctrine of the agent intellect is no support for a constitutive understanding of the knowing powers. To be such a support, the agent intellect's illumination would have to be analogically construed along the lines of "colored" light. Colored light presents things in a way different than they are otherwise. It "adds" to the perception of the object. In the traditional account, however, the agent intellect is analogically compared to natural light. But natural light is colorless. And so without projecting color, natural light lets you see color that is in the object. Accordingly, the analogy should run: just as natural light is a condition for seeing color without being a case of color, so too the agent intellect is a condition for knowledge without being a case of knowledge. It is impossible to see any constitutive role in the vein of transcendental philosophy being assumed

by the agent intellect. Furthermore, the aptness of this standard analogy for conveying the agent intellect derives from the fact that the object of intellection is the same content found in the individual but now as existing in a universal manner. Content wise man is simply Socrates writ large. I see no basis in the facts of cognition requiring the insertion of a constitutive a priori factor in order to go from the individual to the intellectual concept.

To conclude my objection to McBrien's views, I acknowledge that McBrien wants to say that his understanding of the human subject is required by Scripture's description of the human being as having always been called to supernatural elevation. This divine call must have an effect, and in McBrien's opinion that effect must be a human with an innate sense of God.<sup>12</sup> Also, I acknowledge that McBrien's view has the advantage of avoiding a superficiality of the relation between grace and nature found in Renaissance Scholasticism with its talk of a purely natural terminative end for man.<sup>13</sup> Finally, I again acknowledge the traditional pedigree of McBrien's position. Nevertheless, despite all the above, the position is an epistemological disaster. We have Kant to thank for showing us that. If all our knowledge is mediated in and through a constitutive subjective factor, then all knowledge claims must be placed on hold until the objectivity of that factor has been established. In my opinion this can never be done. Even an appeal to theology's idea of a called human nature will not work here because the appeal is to something that is itself understood to be mediated by this still unchecked factor.

True, previous Scholastic discussions of nature and grace did have their shortcomings. But because of problems fending off skepticism, McBrien's solution is a cure worse than the disease. The Transcendental Thomist approach is a dead end from which the Catholic theologian should retreat as the nature/grace discussion is once again re-engaged. There are alternatives for conceiving the nature/grace relation yet to be explored.<sup>14</sup>

What does my criticism mean for the Catholic theologian teaching theology today? I want to mention five points, four brief ones, and one lengthy one. First, because of epistemological problems already mentioned, the subject to which revelation is addressed should not be understood as having an innate God-sense that functions in any fundamental constitutive way. Second, any presumed sense of God should be understood as built up by the subject from experience with sensible things,

that is, as engendered *a posteriori*. Third, and consequently, a theologian can guess and expect that this God-sense will possess all the shortcomings of *a posteriori* knowledge. These shortcomings include: in-attentiveness to the truly fitting features of reality that prove God, slips in reasoning, personal and social biases. Fourth, and furthermore, the theologian should understand that any success in communicating revelation to unbelievers will be hard won. The theologian cannot presume an infallible God-sense in listeners that will pave the way for the theologian's message. Rather, the theologian will most probably find a twisted and contorted position on God shot through with a confusion that the theologian must come to understand intimately and to dissect if the theologian is to be understandable.<sup>15</sup> To conclude my fourth point, let me say that in the *a posteriori* view of the *praeambulae*, the theologian needs to be adept in philosophical, psychological, and sociological analyses.

Fifth and finally, given my background in philosophy, I want to say a few words on the type of philosophy that would be advantageous for the theologian to know. In the Catholic tradition, there exists at least one great theologian who was an unmitigated *posteriorist*. I am familiar with the textual studies by Transcendental Thomists that make Aquinas a member of that camp. In published articles I have tried to explain why I find these studies inaccurate.<sup>16</sup> Rather, for Aquinas no intellectual power contains prior knowledge that is brought to bear on the data of sensation. True, each power is a particular nature definite and determinate from other things. But their natures do not make them of themselves cases of knowledge. They are simply conditions of knowledge, not cases of it. As such, their natures dispose them to know reality. What is fundamentally known remains the sole function of the real as it meets and informs the intellect.

As regards our knowledge of God, Aquinas' position was twofold. There exists an ordinary knowledge of God possessed by all mature human beings and there exists a scientific knowledge of God possessed by the philosophers in metaphysics. Both are *a posteriori* cases of knowledge. Aquinas describes the first case this way:

For, when men see that things in nature run according to a definite order, and that ordering does not occur without an orderer, they perceive in most cases that there is some orderer of the things that we see.<sup>17</sup>

The passage recounts a primitive version of the teleological argument, and it has all the shortcomings thereof. For example, Aquinas notes that one does not yet grasp who or what is this orderer or if the orderer is one or many. On the strength of this argument, some identify the orderer with the heavenly bodies, the elements, or other human beings. Nevertheless, the argument has the advantage of establishing in the mind an openness to a transcendent and superior being. This provides a rudimentary context into which the theologian can begin to send the Christian message.

Deficiencies in this first approach to God are set aside by demonstrations in metaphysics.<sup>18</sup> For example, metaphysics proves that God is immutable, eternal, incorporeal, simple, one, etc. The metaphysics that achieves these demonstrations is one that understands that anything in our experience is a being, an existent, because it possesses its *actus essendi*, its act of being.<sup>19</sup> Just as a man is

called a runner because he possesses something distinct that is his act of running, so too the same man would be called a being because he possesses another act, his act of being. For Aquinas the phrase “the existence of the thing” fundamentally means not the fact of the thing but an act of the thing.

As revealed to the philosopher through the intellectual operation of judgment, this *actus* contains sufficient intelligible propellant to raise the mind to the aforementioned conclusions. If the theologian has the requisite patience, the Thomistic texts will show that this metaphysics is set up in a thoroughly *a posteriori* manner. In Aquinas’ metaphysics of *actus essendi*, then, the theologian has an *a posteriori* presentation of the *praeambulae fidei*, one that avoids the pitfalls of skepticism in McBrien’s Transcendental Thomist interpretation of the same.



## NOTES

1Augustine, *Confessions*, 7.9 and 10, trans. by F.J. Sliced (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1992).

2Richard McBrien, *Catholicism: Completely Revised and Updated*, 3d ed. (San Francisco: Harpers, 1994), 267.

3Ibid.

4Ibid.

5*Catholicism*, 1st ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Winston Press, 1980), 236.

6Augustine, *De Libero arbitrio*, 2.12, trans. John Wippel and Alan Wolter, *Medieval Philosophy from St. Augustine to Nicholas of Cusa* (New York: The Free Press, 1969), 76-77: “Hence you would not deny that some unchanging truth exists which contains (*continentem*) all of these things that are unchangeably true and that it cannot be called exclusively mine or yours or any man’s. It offers itself to all who discern things immutably true, like a light which in some strange fashion is both public yet concealed.... What think you of this truth we’ve taken so long to describe and in which we see so many things (*et in qua tam multa conspicimus*)?”

7Bonaventure, *Quaestiones disputatae de mysterio Trinitatis*, q. 1, art. 1, in J. Wippel and A. Wolter, *Medieval Philosophy*, 301: “Likewise, a desire for wisdom has been implanted in the minds of men, for the Philosopher says [*Metaphysics* I, chap. 1]: ‘All men by nature desire to know.’ But the most desirable wisdom is eternal. It is the desire for such, then, that is most deeply impressed upon the human mind. As we said before, however, there is no love for what is completely unknown. Consequently, some knowledge of this highest wisdom must be implanted in the human mind. But this means, first of all, knowing that God or Wisdom itself exists.”

8McBrien, *Catholicism*, 3d ed., 151.

9John F. X. Knasas, “Intellectual Dynamism in Transcendental Thomism: A Metaphysical Assessment,” *The American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 69 (1995): 15-28.

10McBrien, *Catholicism*, 3d ed., 264.

11Transcendental Thomists would note that Aquinas’ use of the maxim “Whatever is received into something is received according to the condition of the recipient” “indicates a sympathy with their thesis of an *a priori*

factor for the intellect. They read the maxim as saying that the subject makes its own contribution to the received. If the receiving subject is the intellect, then the intellect's own contribution will have to be understood in the fashion of an a priori contributing factor. But, in my opinion, this reading misunderstands Aquinas' use of the maxim. As the maxim is used of the intellect at *S. T. I*, 75, Sc, it does not signal an *addition* by the intellect to what is received but a *subtraction* from the received, viz., the intellect receives the form without the matter. To be an *a priori* factor, however, the intellect should be adding, not subtracting, something. The senses in their own manner receive form without the matter; see *S. T. I*, 14, 1 c. Augustine's "restless heart" remark at the opening of his *Confessions* could also be used by Transcendental Thomists, though they shy away from Augustine because of his apparent 'divine ideas' view of the mind's *a priori*. At *S. T. II-II*, 175, 1, ad 1 m and citing Rom. 1:20, Aquinas gives an *a posteriori* interpretation to Augustine's text.

12McBrien, *Catholicism*, 3d ed., 181-2.

13For the superficiality, or extrinsicism, of the grace to nature problem, see Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), ch. 4.

14See William R. O'Connor, *The Natural Desire for God* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1948). At *S. T. II-II*, 175, 1, ad 1m, Aquinas provides an a posteriori interpretation of Augustine's "restless heart" remark at the opening of the *Confessions*.

15In this fourth respect, I think that McBrien is too restrictive to demand the following as one criterion of true prophesy: "A prophetic word that is so unusual that it bears no visible connection with ordinary life is also situated on the borders of credibility" (262). In light of his Transcendental Thomism and the need to justify his continuing dissent from *Humanae vitae*, I understand how McBrien thinks he can say this. But in light of the philosophical problems of Transcendental Thomism and a shift to a thoroughly *a posteriori* view of human knowing, unsympathetic reactions to Church teaching should not be considered anomalous or embarrassing.

16 "Transcendental Thomism and the Thomistic Texts," *The Thomist* 54 (1990): 81-95, and "Transcendental Thomism and *De Veritate* I, 9," *Thomistic Papers* VI, edited by John F. X. Knasas (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1994), 229-252.

17Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, 38, *Inquirendum*; trans. Vernon J. Bourke (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 125.

18 "On the other hand, there is another sort of knowledge of God, higher than the foregoing, and we may acquire it through demonstration. ... In fact demonstration shows that God is immutable, eternal, incorporeal, altogether simple, one, and other such things which we have shown about God in Book One." Ibid, III, 39, *Rursus*. In Book One, ch. 4, *Quidam autem*, attainment of naturally accessible divine truth is explicitly reserved for the last part of philosophy, metaphysics.

19 See my "Thomistic Existentialism and the Proofs *Ex Motu at Contra Gentiles* I, C. 13," *The Thomist* 59 (1995): 591-616.











*“Philosophy is the search for  
the ultimate ground of the  
Being of things, and ends at  
the doorstep of the divine.”*

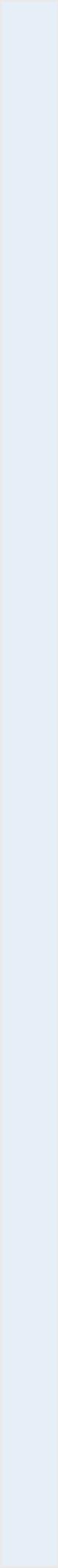














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