

Understanding Von Balthasar's Trilogy*

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ABSTRACT: The article presents the structure of Hans Urs Von Balthasar's thought from the synthesis he achieved in his "Theological Trilogy": "Theological Aesthetics," "Theo-Drama," and "Theo-Logic". Because the Trilogy is based on the three transcendentals of Being (beauty, goodness, and truth), this study—after reviewing Balthasar's influences throughout his life—describes his understanding of the relationship between philosophy and theology and explains how the trinitarian revelation can be aptly expressed through God's manifestation (beauty), bestowal (goodness), and comprehension (truth).

KEY WORDS: Hans Urs Von Balthasar, Theological Trilogy, Balthasar's Influences, Balthasar's Thought, Balthasar's Theology.

Comprensión de la trilogía de Hans Urs Von Balthasar

RESUMEN: El artículo expone la estructura de pensamiento de Hans Urs Von Balthasar a partir de la síntesis que este logró en su "Trilogía teológica": "Estética teológica", "Teo-dramática" y "Teológica". Debido a que la Trilogía está basada en los tres trascendentales del ser (belleza, bondad y verdad), este estudio, luego de revisar las fuentes e influencias que recibió Von Balthasar a lo largo de su vida, describe su comprensión de la relación entre filosofía y teología y explica cómo toda la revelación trinitaria se puede expresar muy bien a partir de la manifestación (belleza), donación (bondad) y comprensión (verdad) de Dios.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Hans Urs Von Balthasar, trilogía teológica, influencias de Von Balthasar, pensamiento de Von Balthasar, teología de Von Balthasar.

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Introduction

Hans Urs Von Balthasar (1905-1988) stated that his “Theological Trilogy” was “the fundamental project, the goal of [his] life.”¹ Written between 1961 and 1987, it reflects the deepest aspects of his thought and is the result of many years of study, contemplation, apostolic devotion, and fertile dialog with several authors. He said himself, in 1965, that gradually “the thought arose of presenting in a somewhat rounded-off form the aspect of Christianity that can no more be outgrown by today’s man than it was by men of the past. Thus there came to maturity the plan of a trilogy.”² Happily, he managed to finish it, with an *Epilogue*, one year before his death. It is a difficult, complex work, but one which aptly expresses the synthesis that he was able to generate by the end of his life.

To understand this *Trilogy* today, in its thought structure, three actions are required: (1) To review its multiple influences, because Von Balthasar finds nourishment in many others and harmoniously integrates them into his theology; (2) to understand the peculiar relationship between philosophy and theology which structures the deepest parts of his thought; and (3) to study the way in which his theological synthesis is based on the transcendentals of Being: beauty, goodness, and truth, which resulted in a “Theological Aesthetics,” a “Theo-Drama,” and a “Theo-Logic.” These are the three steps we will now take.

Relevant Influences

Von Balthasar himself warns us that “my own work is what it is only in unity with others,”³ among which those of Erich Przywara and Adrienne Von Speyr are prominent. What lies behind this statement is the conviction that his literary work is simply at the service of his ecclesial calling and “determination to display the Christian message in its unsurpassable greatness (*id quo majus cogitari nequit*), because it is God’s human word for the world, God’s most humble service eminently fulfilling every human striving.”⁴ This is why he devoted his life to “the fullness of the Church’s tradition,”⁵ because “only the best has a chance to survive”⁶ in a “present [that] is continually pressing forward.”⁷

¹ Von Balthasar, *My Work: In retrospect*, 94.

² *Ibid.*, 79.

³ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 78-79.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.

Throughout his life,⁸ he often remembered the great sources of his inspiration and thought. In 1945, he said that as a student of Germanic philology (*Germanistik*) in Vienna, Berlin, and Zürich, his most important influences were “Plato, Hölderlin, above all Goethe and Hegel.”⁹ In 1965, he gratefully remembered “the chaste Virgil and the God-filled heart of Plotinus,”¹⁰ who “fascinated”¹¹ him, not forgetting the “wonderful” Homer¹². Thus, the first source to understand Von Balthasar’s thought, as per his own assertion, are the classical authors, poets and philosophers, and German literature and philosophy.

In this regard, his musical tastes also played a role, especially Bach, Mozart, and Haydn.¹³ When, already in the Society of Jesus, he started his philosophical-theological studies, he met Erich Przywara in Munich, “an unforgettable guide and master,” “a combination of depth and fullness of analytic clarity and all-embracing synoptic vision.”¹⁴ Apart from granting him his friendship, Przywara not only showed Saint Thomas to him in the totality of his work, but also forced him “to engage at the same time (as he did) in modern thought [...] to confront Augustine and Aquinas with Hegel, Scheler and Heidegger.”¹⁵

Aquinas is an indispensable source for understanding Von Balthasar: as early as 1945, he already wished “to publish an overall interpretation”¹⁶ of him. In his interpretation of Thomas he is also indebted, among others, to Gustav Siewerth, a man “fearful in his philosophical anger against those who had forgotten Being and, thereby, the freer to speak happily and tenderly of the innermost mystery of reality: of the God of love, of the heart as the center of man, of the pain of existence, of the Cross borne by the Father’s child.”¹⁷ He states that, “without him the third volume of *Herrlichkeit* (volumes 4 and 5 of *The Glory of the Lord [The Realm of Metaphysics in*

⁸ For a good biography, see Guerriero, *Hans Urs Von Balthasar*; you can also see Henrici, “Hans Urs Von Balthasar: A Sketch of His Life”.

⁹ Von Balthasar, *My Work*, 10; *ibid.*, 41.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹¹ *Idem*, *Test Everything: Hold Fast to What Is Good: An Interview with Hans Urs Von Balthasar by Angelo Scola*, 10.

¹² *Idem*, *My Work*, 88.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 10; 42.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁵ *Idem*, *Test Everything*, 11.

¹⁶ *Idem*, *My Work*, 12.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 90-91.

Antiquity and The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age) would not have received this present form.”¹⁸

While he was still studying theology, his stay at Lyon-Fourvière provided him with a lasting “love for the great Catholic poets of France”¹⁹: Paul Claudel, Charles Péguy, Georges Bernanos. But it was his encounter and friendship with Henri de Lubac—a long-lasting friendship and mutual admiration²⁰—which was to decide the direction of his studies. He read Augustine carefully, but the master advised him to pay special attention to the Alexandrians. From that moment onwards “a wider panorama opened up”²¹: Irenaeus, Clement, Gregory of Nyssa, and Maximus the Confessor.

All things considered, he declared that “Origen (who was for me, as once for Erasmus, more important than Augustine) became the key to the entire Greek patristics, the early Middle Ages and, indeed, even to Hegel and Karl Barth.”²² He would also say: “nowhere else am I as comfortable as with him,”²³ “the most sovereign spirit of the first centuries.”²⁴

The Church Fathers and their profound and adequate way of understanding the unity and distinction between theology and philosophy were to exert a key influence on his own way of comprehending how philosophy “finds its final response only in the revelation of Christ.”²⁵ Upon the basis of the principle that “without philosophy, there can be no theology,”²⁶ the theologian “must—precisely also in the light of revelation—have immersed [himself] in the mysterious structures of creaturely being,”²⁷ marveling at their complexity, which will make him wonder “just what it is that makes finite being an ‘image and likeness’ of absolute being.”²⁸

Thus, for Von Balthasar, one cannot methodologically exclude the possibility of supernatural revelation; instead, the task is “integration,” that is, “collaboration between philosophy and theology,” which can only occur “if both disciplines are

¹⁸ Ibid., 91.

¹⁹ Ibid., 13; 34-35.

²⁰ De Lubac, “Ein Zeuge Christi in der Kirche: Hans Urs Von Balthasar”, 390-395.

²¹ Von Balthasar, *My Work*, 11.

²² Ibid., 89.

²³ Idem, *Zu seinem Werk*, 131.

²⁴ Idem, *My Work*, 11.

²⁵ Ibid., 118.

²⁶ Idem, *Theo-Logic. I: Truth of the World*, 7.

²⁷ Ibid., 8.

²⁸ Ibid., 10.

intrinsically open to each other. But this intrinsic openness is itself possible only on the condition that we recenter our intellectual effort on thinking through the analogy between the divine archetype and the worldly image from both sides.”²⁹

The Jesuit religious vocation, as an experience of having been unexpectedly taken hold of by “the kindly hand of God” and having been chosen “for a true life,”³⁰ when he was “ever more disillusioned and with an ever emptier stomach,”³¹ constituted another seminal experience for his future. Those month-long spiritual exercises for lay students conducted in Wyhlen, near Basel, in 1927, were decisive: “But it was not theology or priesthood that entered my eyes, but simply this: you have nothing to choose, you have been chosen; you need nothing, you are needed; you need not make plans, you are a little stone in an existing mosaic.”³² For this reason he stated in 1955 that “all that is decisive takes place in the spiritual space that lies between the two poles of John and Ignatius.”

The maturing Christian who must choose his life is led by Ignatius to the personal encounter with Christ: into a contemplation of the concrete Gospel situation [...] which is determined by the “call”—as the basic concept of the life of Jesus—and “choice”—as the central act of the encounter. Christ chooses and calls us; our choice of him is only the answer that obedience makes.³³

The *Exercises*, “the great school of christocentric contemplation, of attention to the pure and personal word contained in the gospel, of lifelong commitment to the attempt at following,”³⁴ are a truly decisive element in Von Balthasar’s theology. For him, the Christian existence is “in its ‘primordial’ sense: effective hearing of the Word who calls and growth in freedom for the expected response.”³⁵ This will be plainly illustrated especially by his *Theo-Drama*. His theology is, to a great extent, a deep reflection on and a fruit of the Exercises.

In connection with the above, inasmuch as everything that has been said “demanded a wide-ranging theology of the Word,”³⁶ we become aware of the importance of his encounter with Karl Barth and the deep friendship which he later

²⁹ Ibid., 15.

³⁰ Idem, *My Work*, 10.

³¹ Idem, *Zu seinem Werk*, 10 (translated from the original German version, because the English translation accidentally bypassed this phrase).

³² Von Balthasar & De Buck, ¿Por qué me hice sacerdote?, 14.

³³ Idem, *My Work*, 20.

³⁴ Ibid., 51.

³⁵ Ibid., 52.

³⁶ Ibid., 25.

formed with him in Basel. He notably asserts that “it is almost unnecessary to set out how much I owe to Karl Barth: as I have already said, the vision of a comprehensive biblical theology, combined with the urgent invitation to engage in a dogmatically serious ecumenical dialogue.” His famous book *Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe (Love Alone Is Credible)* “represents perhaps the closest approach to his position from the Catholic side.”³⁷ Barth’s influence is perceived in successive moments of the *Trilogy* in these two points: the Word of God and the love of Christ on the cross, which surpasses all human knowledge.

And, as it is known, Adrienne Von Speyr (1902-1967) occupies a preeminent place.³⁸ Von Balthasar is extremely explicit and conscious of this: “In Basel, the mission of Adrienne Von Speyr [...] was decisive.”

[It was she] who showed the way in which Ignatius is fulfilled by John and therewith laid the basis for most of what I have published since 1940. Her work and mine are neither psychologically nor philologically to be separated: two halves of a single whole, which has as its center a unique foundation.³⁹

This should be understood, as Von Balthasar himself says, in the sense that “the greater part of so much of what I have written is a translation of what is present in more immediate, less ‘technical’⁴⁰ fashion in the powerful work of Adrienne Von Speyr.”⁴¹ What Von Balthasar has attempted to do is “gather it [Adrienne’s thought] up and embed it in a space, such as the theology of the Fathers, that of the Middle Ages and the Modern Age.” This “consisted in providing a comprehensive theological horizon, so that all that was new and valid in her thought would not be watered down or falsified, but be given space to unfold.”

His intention was, essentially, to put into writing in a theological context, in contact with all the tradition and with the best of Christianity, the *intuitions* of this contemplative and mystical woman, since “the Holy Spirit may suddenly illuminate parts of revelation that have always been there, but have not been sufficiently reflected upon.”⁴² As Adrienne’s vast work becomes known, once it is fully published, it will be possible to establish the truth of this influence.⁴³

³⁷ Ibid., 89-90.

³⁸ Servais, “Per una valutazione dell’influsso di Adrienne von Speyr su Hans Urs Von Balthasar”, 75-85.

³⁹ Von Balthasar, *My Work*, 89.

⁴⁰ Unlike the German original, which reads “technische”, the English translation does not enclose the word *technical* in quotation marks.

⁴¹ Von Balthasar, *My Work*, 105.

⁴² Idem, *Test Everything*, 88.

⁴³ Idem, *My Work*, 105-107.

There is a fundamental concordance between the works of both authors, albeit from two different approaches: contemplative-intuitive the one and theological the other. However, this does not mean that both aspects can be neatly distinguished.⁴⁴ In short, Adrienne Von Speyr's life and work were especially relevant in guiding the course of Von Balthasar's theological reflection, by providing him with some basic "intuitions"⁴⁵ that function as "milestones" in his *Theological Trilogy*, for example, the reflections on intratrinitarian life and those on Jesus' descent into hell.⁴⁶

This review of the various influences which shed light on our author is by no means intended to be exhaustive. It simply aims to show that his work will be properly understood only if one bears in mind the multiple sources which make his work an integrative synthesis of a large variety of reference points. This is where his richness and great originality lies: in his very personal, and also faithful, reading of these authors. But this derives, in addition, from a profound programmatic conviction.

Along with wishing to present the best of the Christian tradition and what is unsurpassable in Christianity, he was convinced that "whoever sees more of the truth is more profoundly right,"⁴⁷ which is "the method of increasing integration,"⁴⁸ but which must be complemented by embracing the revelation of "the concrete universal that is Christ" as "the world-embracing *Logos*."⁴⁹ "If Christ is the concrete first Idea of the creating God [...] and thereby the goal of the world, then it must be permissible to explore the depths of the proposition, 'Once (and for all!) Being [*Sein*] was in Existence [*Dasein*]'⁵⁰. This is "the notorious Catholic 'and' "

...is not in fact a lukewarm compromise or syncretism but rather the power to unite, once again in "dramatic" fashion, what to men seems desperately fragmentary. Jesus Christ is, in this sense, the Catholic One: God and man, he who descended into hell and ascended into heaven, he himself explores [all] the personal and social dimensions of human existence and reestablishes them out of his own experience.⁵¹

Creation and the human being, as its center, possess a profound internal unity which the incarnate Son reveals to us. Integration "is the spontaneous art of aiming

⁴⁴ Idem, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*. Volume V: *The Last Act*, 13.

⁴⁵ Idem, *My Work*, 106.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Idem, *Epilogue*, 15.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁹ Idem, *My Work*, 63.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 23.

⁵¹ Ibid., 102.

always at the Whole through the fragments of truth discussed and lived. The Whole, then, is always greater than us and our powers of expression, but precisely as it [is] greater animates our Christian life.”⁵² This is the guiding principle of Von Balthasar’s grand literary work: the integrative capacity of the *Logos* made flesh.

Structure of his Thought

On May 10th, 1988, about a month before his death, on the opening of a symposium in Madrid about his own theology, he gave us one last glimpse at his thought, “‘in a nutshell’, as the English say, as far as that can be done without too many betrayals.”⁵³ In it, he gave us “the heart of his thought, because one presupposes that such a heart must exist.”⁵⁴ This will serve as a brief introduction to the study of his *Theological Trilogy*, since he presents it precisely as “a schema of the Trilogy: Aesthetic, Dramatic, and Logic.”⁵⁵ He does this in four steps.

1. He starts with Saint Thomas’ “real distinction,” that is, man’s fundamental recognition of his own finitude: “I am, but I could also, however, not be. Many things that do not exist could exist.”⁵⁶ Essences, *entities*, the things that exist, are limited; in contrast, *Being*, understood as *reality*, the act of being, the fact of existing, is not limited: Being possesses unlimited openness or willingness to exist, to realize entities. The sum of everything that exists does not exhaust the possibilities of existence. This “is the source of all the religious and philosophical thought of humanity”: man “exists as a limited being in a limited world, but his reason is open to the unlimited, to all of Being.”⁵⁷

This “real difference between Being as reality and particular entities”⁵⁸ implies that “a real being,” something that exists, “does not just possess within itself a part of being-real but has the whole of ‘to be,’” that is, it possesses being-real in complete

⁵² Ibid., 105. The American version has slightly modified according to the German original.

⁵³ Ibid., 111. Von Balthasar held his lecture in French (“Essai de résumer ma pensée”), which appeared in *Revue des Deux Mondes* (October, 1988): 100-106, and was translated into English in *My Work: In Retrospect*, 111-119.

⁵⁴ Ibid., *My Work*, 111.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 112.

⁵⁶ Ibid. The English translation matches the French text. In the German original, in contrast, the second sentence is formulated to say the opposite: “Vieles, was existiert, könnte nicht sein.” In any case, the general argumentation of the paragraph leads to the same idea: the finiteness of all creation.

⁵⁷ Von Balthasar, *My Work*, 112; idem, *Epilogue*, 47.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 38 (translated from the original German version, because the English translation accidentally bypassed this paragraph).

form, “even though alongside it there are countless other real things”⁵⁹ which also exist in complete fashion. In addition, this implies that “the whole of reality always exists only via the fragment of a finite essence; but the fragment does not exist except through the entirety of ‘to be real’,”⁶⁰ which makes it exist.

Now, even though each entity and the sum of all beings, including possible ones, cannot grant themselves existence, and at the same time, Being does not have existence in itself, but is always realized in particular and limited beings, and therefore “this which provides reality to the entity,” that is, Being as such, “has no consistency within itself, and so cannot design entities before itself, to realize itself in them; and despite that, the possibility of realizing itself in particular entities must derive from the very fact that Being bestows reality (on the entity). This paradox points to a foundation which is the quintessence of all reality, and which at the same time has the subsistence required to project beings.”⁶¹ The insufficiency of Being as such to exist by itself is what prompts the need for an absolute foundation. It is clear, then, that “all human philosophy [...] is essentially at once religious and theological, because it poses the problem of the Absolute Being, whether one attributes to it a personal character or not.”⁶² The paradox of the “real distinction” has inevitably posed the problem of the Absolute Being. This is the age-old question of why multiplicity exists, or of why there is Being and not nothing.

For Von Balthasar “no philosophy could give a satisfactory response to that question [...] the true response to philosophy could only be given by Being himself, revealing himself from himself,”⁶³ but at the same time, “to be able to hear and understand the auto-revelation of God, man must in himself be a search for God, a question posed to him. Thus there is no biblical theology without a religious philosophy. Human reason must be open to the infinite.”⁶⁴

Here is where the core of Von Balthasar’s thought comes in, and where the structure of his *Theological Trilogy* can be understood: Christ as the answer to the ultimate philosophical question. Because, if Christ illuminates the whole of reality, “this retrospectively cast light lets us see peculiarities of Being, which to us is so obvious, [and] these for their part could throw light on phenomena manifest through them.”⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Ibid., 47.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 38-39 (translated from the original German version, because the English translation accidentally bypassed this paragraph).

⁶² Idem, *My Work*, 112.

⁶³ Ibid., 113.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 114.

⁶⁵ Idem, *Epilogue*, 45.

2. Having laid out the central philosophical problem—Being and its foundation—Von Balthasar takes the second step, which he calls *meta-anthropology*, that is, a reflection about the “question of the being,” but from the “essence of man.” The starting point is the original human experience, when we become aware of ourselves, of the fact that we exist. Here we discover that “man exists only in dialogue with his neighbor.”⁶⁶

This is illustrated by the first experience that a child has of himself, when he becomes aware of himself—of the fact that he exists as himself, distinct from everything else—which is a triple experience: (a) of himself and (b) of his mother as different from himself; but also, in that same act, he perceives that his mother supports him, smiles at him, and (c) loves him. That is, he perceives that he is loved and that existing is beautiful, that it is something good. The I-you relationship has opened up the space of the I for himself, simultaneously with the space of Being and love. In his mother, you and Being fully open themselves to him, at the same time as he becomes aware of himself as an individual and of the love received. And knowing that what appears before him is the essence of Being and not pure appearance—it is really his mother—,

... the horizon of all unlimited being opens itself for him, revealing four things to him: (1) That he is “one” in love with the mother, even in being other than his mother, therefore all being is “one”. (2) That that love is “good”, therefore all Being is “good”. (3) That that love is “true”, therefore all Being is “true”. (4) That that love evokes “joy”, therefore all Being is “beautiful”.⁶⁷

One, good, true, and beautiful are “the transcendental attributes of Being,” characteristics which “surpass all the limits of essences and are coextensive with Being.”⁶⁸ We can thus confirm that the “dialogic” experience of the human being has led us to the transcendental characteristics of Being, that is, to its innermost structure.

3. It was said above that the paradox of the real distinction had opened us up to the Absolute Being, but inasmuch as “there is an unsurmountable distance between God and his creature,” and at the same time there is “an analogy between them that cannot be resolved in any form of identity, there must also exist an analogy between the transcendentals—between those of the creature and those in God.”⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Idem, *My Work*, 114.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 115.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

This is the foundation of the third step in Von Balthasar's *Theological Trilogy*: the structuring of his theology and his philosophy upon the basis of the transcendentals of Being, since this is the form in which Being is concretely found—in its transcendental attributes. The two principles that we have proposed as foundation, the analogy of Being, which speaks of reality as image of the Archetype, and the Being which is structured “concretely in its attributes (not categorical, but transcendental),” completely inter-related (“as the transcendentals run through all Being, they must be interior to each other: that which is truly true is also truly good and beautiful and one”⁷⁰), in turn imply three consequences for authentically understanding reality:

- First, in God as Absolute Being and cause of Being, these attributes must also exist absolutely-
- Second, if these attributes have been discovered based on man's dialogic nature, then we cannot deny God's full dialogic capacity: being Word.
- And third, in the creature these transcendental characteristics can only exist in partial and limited fashion, that is, “polarized in the domain of finitude.”⁷¹

In fact, the created being is *dual*: it is transversed by a constitutive and basic polarity, which entails constant tension between the poles, but which at the same time makes it possible for its own being to develop. Being as totality, “reality (*esse*) can only be one [...] inasmuch as it is *completum et simplex*,” but, on the other hand, that reality which is one, Being, only subsists “in an immense number of entities [*Wesen*],” each of which is, precisely, an in-divisible unit, “the individual,”⁷² an “*in-dividuum*.”⁷³

This dual tension between Being—or totality—and entity—or individuality—makes both aspects involve each other and live through mutual bestowal: “Being [*Sein*] gives to beings [*Wesen*] its own indivisibility, while the individual beings give to Being [...] its *real-ization*.”⁷⁴ Von Balthasar called this “an ontic love” (*eine ontische Liebe*): each entity gives itself to others, and at the same time, it opens up a space in itself for others. All entities, for their self-perfection, “need an alien space, outside both subject and object, in which they can be safeguarded [...]but they...” are unable to claim this space on the basis of their own selves.⁷⁵ And the fact that others need me does not

⁷⁰ Ibid., 115-116

⁷¹ Ibid., 115.

⁷² Idem, *Epilogue*, 55.

⁷³ This word, which appears in the German original, is translated as “the individual” in the American edition (ibid., 43).

⁷⁴ Ibid., 55.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 53.

allow me to take possession of them, because I also need others to become aware of myself as distinct from others. All existence is experienced, ultimately, as a gift that was not requested and which cannot be demanded.

This constitutive polarity of every created entity will also extend, therefore, to beauty, given that “every worldly being is epiphanic, in the difference just described.”

This phenomenal form of the entity is the way it expresses itself; it is a kind of voiceless [...] speech [...] in which things express not only themselves but the whole [of] reality existing in them as well, a reality that, as *non subsistens*, points to the subsisting real.⁷⁶

This polarity means that the real manifests itself or appears always in a beautiful *form*, a form which at the same time

...points to the reality that is both appearing in that form and simultaneously transcending it. The inner polarity of the transcendent ontic property of beauty lies in this duality of luminous form resting in itself and the innate tendency of form to point beyond itself to an (actual) being illuminated in it.⁷⁷

It is the duality that resides in the fact that the Being *appears* and that it is the *Being* which appears. The form points to Being and Being can only appear in the form. And this form, apart from manifesting Being, at the same time somehow conceals Being. Being is the one that appears, but it is always more than what appears. And the fact that it manifests and bestows itself does not make it lose anything of itself.

The same polarity applies, necessarily, to the transcendental of goodness, because “the transcendentals that permeate all Being can only exist within one another.” We know that everything that “is shown (beauty) imparts itself (goodness),” and so “even worldly goodness has a polar structure.”⁷⁸ In fact, what is good is that which is, somehow, desired, sought, needed. Thomas says that “*omnia bonum appetunt*,” “not just knowing beings but nonconscious beings too” (*De veritate* 22,1).⁷⁹

Thus, all beings strive—consciously or unconsciously—to good because they need it or because it satisfies them. If this is so, then, every being, and the human being in particular, must give himself to others, because others need him, like I myself need others. We all have the right to receive good from others. But as man, certainly, needs love, it can be concluded that he is entitled to love. Here emerges, then, the unfathomable paradox of the human being: he has a right, without

⁷⁶ Ibid. 59.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 60.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 69.

⁷⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*

which he could neither be nor develop as a man, but which “can only be provided in free self-surrender.”⁸⁰ Every human being, who necessarily lives in community with others, needs love, but love, by definition, must be given to him only as an expression of freedom.

Here we can see the expression of the constitutive polarity of goodness: I am entitled to and I need something which is given to me as the freest of gifts. This polarity can also be expressed from another perspective: the “obligation” of every man to do good, born from the existence of others, what we call an “objective norm of action”, is in dual tension with the fact that that good, the relationship with all other human beings, is to be conducted “humanely” only from one’s own “subjective conscience”. This is the radical polarity of every human being: I must do good, but from my freedom, which will allow me to live according to my human condition.

Finally, as culmination of beauty and goodness, is truth, which is “self-expression in speech.” But this testimony of oneself “is more than simply externalizing oneself in manifestation or action,” since “it presupposes the strongest tension between perfect interiority in the freedom of self-consciousness and perfect externalizing” in a language which is not only “natural mimesis and gesture” but also “free imaging, in which the spiritual subject can make known its reflexivity.”⁸¹

Now we observe the polarity of truth: one’s own and free interiority in *dual* relationship with the form of expression conducted through language, which is both natural (bodily gesture) and invented (freedom in expressing oneself). Man can only show and bestow himself through the strictures of words and symbolic language, but that poverty or limitation of language does not prevent him from *truly* communicating and *bestowing* himself. “Souls can truly encounter one another and change places through the narrow passageway of image-bound words.”⁸² This is true, however, not only of human beings, but of every created being. “Self-showing and self-giving must also already be inchoate forms of self-saying.”⁸³

Here the fundamental phenomenon is the epiphanic nature of the being which transfers all of its reality, since self-showing, self-giving, and self-saying are different aspects of appearing, which can only be understood by accepting “the difference between appearance and that which appears.”⁸⁴ “Thus, we can now see in what sense ‘truth’ forms the conclusion to ‘beauty’ and ‘goodness’, in what sense the end must

⁸⁰ Ibid., 70.

⁸¹ Ibid., 77.

⁸² Ibid., 80.

⁸³ Ibid., 77.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 83.

at the same time be the beginning.”⁸⁵ But all this “is only conceivable when the things themselves [...] are ‘words’, enunciated by an infinite, free intellect [...] beings [...] that can perfectly express themselves only in man, who has been given the gift of speech.”⁸⁶ This ultimately means that “the whole unabridged metaphysics of the transcendentals of Being can only be unfolded under the theological light of the creation of the world in the Word of God,”⁸⁷ which does not, however, transform metaphysics into theology.

4. This takes us to the fourth step, which is the theological structuring of the *Trilogy* proper. We have noted that “a basic polarity can be traced through all three transcendental modes,” which is itself “derived from the all-pervading polarity of unity.” Thus, due to the analogy of Being, the issue of the transcendentals in the absolute Being is also necessarily formulated: there the polarity “must be taken up, indeed superseded, into the absolute One, into *the True, the Good, the Beautiful*” which is God.

In the absolute Being, transcendentals are not only not eliminated, but they also coincide fully: “God’s splendor *is* his self-surrender, and this once more *is* his truth.” And that identity is possible because God is “absolute self-possessing freedom.” The transcendentals of Being are not exhausted in God; they reach their plenitude in him, and therefore the presence of these transcendentals of Being in the created reality is the reflection of God’s creation, according to the divine archetype. For this reason, and due to the same analogy of Being, “self-showing, self-bestowal, and self-expressiveness of finite things are not aspects that arise out of their need but belong to their essential ontological perfection.”⁸⁸ And their prototype is therefore the divine Being.

This is the source of the four methodological conclusions for understanding this novel theological structure devised by Von Balthasar:

- All created perfection, inasmuch as it is a divine reflection, must find its prototype in God himself.
- The polarity of Being, or ontological love, the basic structure of created reality, is in its innermost essence a vestige created from the presence of the Other also in God: the Word. This makes creation and revelation possible as God’s self-bestowal.
- The creation of everything in God’s Word is what allows God to “speak” through creation, and what allows man to “heed” his call. God appears, bestows, and

⁸⁵ Ibid., 77.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 78.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 85.

- expresses himself, and therefore man responds within a path of freedom which he embraces, loves, and understands. And that is Christianity: a permanent relationship of following in freedom.
- The question of why there is a world will only find a satisfactory answer in the revelation of Trinity and Incarnation.

Structure of the Trilogy

If philosophy “finds its final response only in the revelation of Christ,”⁸⁹ then the order of the *Theological Trilogy* must be determined precisely by the realization of the three transcendentals of Being:

A being *appears*, it has an epiphany: in that it is beautiful and makes us marvel. In appearing it *gives* itself, it delivers itself to us: it is good. And in giving itself up, it *speaks* itself, it unveils itself: it is true (in itself [and] in the other to which it reveals itself).⁹⁰

This ternary articulation is not a specifically trinitarian articulation (in the sense that the first part refers to the Father, the second to the Son, and the third to the Holy Spirit), as it has sometimes been wrongly supposed. Von Balthasar categorically states that it is not; yet, it is, but only in the deeper sense that “the whole divine Trinity is the focus in all three parts of the trilogy.”⁹¹

So, from beauty, it starts with *A Theological Aesthetics*, called *Herrlichkeit* (*The Glory of the Lord*),⁹² in which “God appears. He appeared to Abraham, to Moses, to Isaiah, finally in Jesus Christ.”⁹³ But “today’s positivistic, atheistic man, who has become blind not only to theology but even to philosophy, needed to be confronted with the phenomenon of Christ and, therein, to learn to ‘see’ again—which is to say, to experience the unclassifiable, total otherness of Christ as the outshining of God’s sublimity and glory” (see Heb 1,3).

The full encounter with Christ can only occur upon the basis of faith. This is the reasoning behind the first volume, which illustrates the relationship between our faith and the *form* (*Gestalt*) of Christ, Word made flesh. But, in this regard also “man’s constitution affords him a certain anticipatory understanding of this experience,” an

⁸⁹ Idem, *My Work*, 118.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 116. The American version has slightly modified according to the German original.

⁹¹ Idem, *Theo-Logic* I, 20.

⁹² For an introduction to this first part, see Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad. A Guide Through Balthasar’s Aesthetics*.

⁹³ *My Work: In retrospect*, 116.

aspect which Von Balthasar develops in volumes 4 and 5 in the form of a history of metaphysics. However, “the true presence of this glory first comes into view only in the salvation history of the Old and New Testaments,” covered in volumes 6 and 7, as the revelation of God’s glory in Christ. And this wondrous experience “is unfolded explicitly by the great Christian theologians,”⁹⁴ as exemplified in volumes 2 and 3.

The great and ever-present challenge posed by the structure of the revelation in Christ, which our author must tackle in all these pages, is that the whole of the revelation, which has necessarily happened in human fashion, can be read: (a) “as mere ‘image’ significant in himself,” but no more than that; or (b) “as the ‘appearance’ of the One to whom he as image points and (according to his own statements about himself) always wants to point, and indeed must point, in order to be understood in its ‘reality’.”⁹⁵

“A moment of grace lies in all beauty: it shows itself to me far beyond what I have a right to expect.”⁹⁶ Here is where the authenticity of Christianity is played out. For this reason, it is necessary to start with the transcendental of beauty: the *form* of the appearance. The core theological question of this first part of the *Theological Trilogy* is therefore: “How do we distinguish his appearance, his epiphany, among the thousand other phenomena in the world?”⁹⁷

Von Balthasar then continues with a *Theological Dramatic Theory*, a *Theo-Drama*.⁹⁸ “According to the perennial practice of the Church, one who has been struck by the splendor of Christ—and, in him, of the triune God—is next introduced into the lived answer that this experience requires.”⁹⁹ “*Praxis*” always follows “*theoria*”. The human response to God is simply our acknowledgment of the demand resulting from having experienced God’s freely given love through his trinitarian bestowal. And “this demand is itself a sheer gift that frees man from his self-entanglement and thus enables him to give an adequate answer to God in the form of Christ’s two-in-one”: love of God and of his neighbor. It is the transcendental of “goodness”.

Here, the objective is “to think through—to the ultimate eschatological consequences—the *bonum* in terms of the history of the dramatic encounter between

⁹⁴ *Theo-Logic I: Truth of the World*, 20.

⁹⁵ *Epilogue*, 63-64.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁹⁷ *My Work: In Retrospect*, 116.

⁹⁸ For an introduction to this second part, see Nichols, *No Bloodless Myth. A Guide Through Balthasar’s Dramatics*.

⁹⁹ *Theo-Logic I: Truth of the World*, 20-21.

the freedom of the triune God and the freedom of sinful and redeemed man.” At the center of this drama is Christ, as the Father’s envoy guided by the Spirit, and thus the whole structure of this part is equally trinitarian. But, in addition, “what is decisive for authentic (human) personal being is participation in Christ’s mission and his fulfillment of this mission through loving obedience.”¹⁰⁰

Thus is constructed this *Theo-Drama* in five volumes:

It opens with lengthy *Prolegomena*, in which Von Balthasar presents and explains all the literary instruments, taken from the dramatics, which he will use to explain the δράμα (i.e. action) comprising the existential relationship of man with God in Christ. Along with a structure based on the transcendentals, this use of the language of dramatics is one of Von Balthasar’s great novelties and one of his most significant contributions to contemporary theology. The author then studies the characters in this drama. First, the human being.

The second volume contains a philosophical-theological anthropology.

The third volume is christological: Christ is the main character in the drama and the one in whom all others participate.

The fourth volume describes the action, the drama itself. It discusses soteriology, which cannot be separated from the two previous volumes. It presents, to its ultimate consequences, the “*pro nobis*” of the Son of God made flesh. Its key concept is that of “substitution” (*Stellvertretung*): Jesus takes our place as sinners and accepts all its consequences, even the descent into hell and the abandonment of the Father.

The fifth volume closes with a reflection on the ultimate motive of that drama: the increasing “no” of the world to the increasing “yes” of God. It is necessary to set out the final solution that the cross provides. And if divine freedom does not force, but instead persuades, there is always the possibility of extreme rejection and condemnation. This is the eschatology which can only be seen from the Trinity.¹⁰¹ The great theological issue presented in this part of the *Trilogy* is the question: “How does the absolute liberty of God in Jesus Christ confront the relative, but true, liberty of man?”¹⁰² That is, how is it possible for God to continue to be absolute liberty, if he creates and allows the existence of a relative liberty, that of the human being? And, on the other hand, how can a relative liberty be realized without God ceasing to really be God?

¹⁰⁰ *Theo-Logic I. Truth of the World*, 21.

¹⁰¹ See *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*. Volume V: *The Last Act*, 55-57.

¹⁰² *My Work: In Retrospect*, 117.

This is the core of the *Theo-Drama*—and of the whole *Theological Trilogy*—and the core of all human history and Christianity. The solution will be presented according to the way in which God acts. The question is: “Does it have the power to let itself be assimilated by a freedom?”¹⁰³ The answer is clear: it is not through arguments, nor through good examples, not even through the power to convince. It is simply done through vicarious substitution, which takes up all human rejection, and through the sending of the Holy Spirit, which makes “the external *prescription* [become] the *inscription* of human freedom itself”¹⁰⁴ (see Jr 31,33). What God wants is what is wished by man. As can be observed, the solution is only christological-trinitarian.

And it closes with the transcendental of “truth”: a *theological logic*, a *Theo-logic*.¹⁰⁵ “Man is not just a perceiver and an actor; he is also a thinker, speaker, and formulator.”¹⁰⁶ “The first two parts of the trilogy presupposed that God can make himself comprehensible to human beings and enable them to follow him.” We must now deal with this assumption. This prompts the question of “how the infinite truth of God and his Logos can express itself, not just vaguely and approximatively, but adequately, in the narrow vessel of human logic.”¹⁰⁷

We said just now that there can be no Christian *praxis* not guided by a *theoria* as its light and norm. Similarly, our project has to conclude with a reflection on the possibility of expressing and justifying this *praxis* in human concepts and words.¹⁰⁸

The answer is necessarily trinitarian. Theology, strictly speaking, is born from God himself, who has revealed himself and has therefore “expressed” himself in his Word made flesh (Jn 1,14), and who has at the same time enabled man to understand and receive him through the force and the light of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Yet, paradoxically, “the God who truly and unreservedly ex-poses himself does not therefore cease to be a mystery.”¹⁰⁹ In consequence, Volume 2 will discuss how “an infinite Word [can] express itself in a finite word without losing its sense. That will be the problem of the two natures of Jesus Christ,” of his incarnation, through which God manages to make himself definitely and truly understood by man. And volume 3, in turn, will

¹⁰³ *Epilogue*, 71.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁰⁵ For an introduction to this third part, see Nichols, *Say It Is Pentecost. A Guide Through Balhassar's Logic*.

¹⁰⁶ *Theo-Logic* I, 22.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

refer to the role of the Holy Spirit, that is, how, through its action, “the limited spirit of man [can] come to grasp the unlimited sense of the Word of God.”¹¹⁰ This is the essence and the mission of the Holy Spirit.

However, this transcendental reality, which expresses itself without ceasing to be a mystery, “is already anticipated in the structures of intra-worldly truth.”¹¹¹ This is why the *Theo-logic* starts with a volume devoted to “The Truth of the World”. It is an excellent introduction to philosophical epistemology. The great challenge of this third part as a whole, which is slightly shorter than previous ones, is to grasp how God can make himself understood, truly and really, by men, without ceasing to be ineffable because of this: *Si comprehendis non est Deus*.¹¹² The glory of God, which manifests itself truly, “cannot be exhausted by God’s surrender. Nor can we ever reach the end of our enjoyment, let alone succeed in analyzing it into words.”¹¹³ This is the *mystery*, in a strict sense.

This is the suggestive articulation of the *theological Trilogy*. Von Balthasar closes it with his basic conviction:

The Christian response to the question posed in the beginning relative to the religious philosophies of humanity [...] is contained in these two fundamental dogmas: that of the Trinity and that of the Incarnation. In the trinitarian dogma, God is one, good, true and beautiful because he is essentially Love, and Love supposes the one, the other, and their unity. And if it is necessary to suppose the Other, the Word, the Son, in God, then the otherness of the creation is not a fall, a disgrace, but an image of God, even as it is not God. And as the Son in God is the eternal icon of the Father, he can without contradiction assume in himself the image that is the creation, purify it and make it enter into the communion of the divine life without dissolving it.¹¹⁴

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¹¹⁰ Idem, *My Work*, 117.

¹¹¹ Idem, *Theo-Logic* I, 22.

¹¹² Augustinus, “Sermones de Novo Testamento (51-70A)”: Sermon 52,16, 71.

¹¹³ Von Balthasar, *Epilogue*, 84.

¹¹⁴ Idem, *My Work*, 118.

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