Understanding Our Being
An Introduction to Speculative Philosophy in the Perennial Tradition

In his encyclical *Fides et ratio* (1998), John Paul II invited philosophers who wished their work to cohere with the "word of God" (i.e., revelation) to develop their thinking "in organic continuity with the great tradition which, beginning with the ancients, passes through the Fathers of the Church and the masters of Scholasticism and includes the fundamental achievements of modern and contemporary thought" (#85). He added: "I appeal to all philosophers, and to all teachers of philosophy, asking them to have the courage to recover, in the flow of an enduringly valid philosophical tradition, the range of authentic wisdom and truth" (#106).

At this time I am completing the first of two projected textbooks inspired by the above call of *Fides et ratio*. Titled, respectively, *Understanding Our Being* and *Achieving the Good*, these books will introduce students to the speculative and the practical dimensions of what the late Pope referred to as the "enduringly valid philosophical tradition." For John Paul II's "enduringly valid" many writers substitute the term "perennial" —which, according to Jacques Maritain (who is mentioned as a 20th C. model in *Fides et ratio*, #74), refers to a philosophical approach that, while firmly grounded in ancient wisdom, is "eternally young and always inventive, and involves a fundamental need, inherent in its very being, to grow and renew itself" in every age. The two volumes I am developing present a contemporary renewal of this tradition suitable for the general undergraduate.

Texts of this sort were very popular a half century ago, with volumes devoted to various aspects of the perennial philosophy published by such luminaries as Herman Reith, C.S.C., of the University of Notre Dame, George Klubertanz, S.J., of Saint Louis University, and a revered predecessor as department chair at Creighton University, Henri Renard, S.J. Given the developments at Vatican Council II, the dramatic changes over 50 years in Western intellectual culture, and the concrete renewal of certain aspects of the tradition through an incorporation of "achievements of…contemporary thought," a new effort at presenting the core of the perennial philosophy seems eminently worthwhile. Also relevant is the fact that there has been a reduction in credit hours in philosophy in the core curricula that typically characterize Catholic colleges and universities. Whereas most students attending such institutions in the 1950's and 1960's took required courses in logic, metaphysics, philosophy of man (or "the human person"), philosophical theology, general ethics, etc., students at our institutions today typically receive their introduction to philosophy via two or three courses. The new textbooks here described, besides responding to *Fides et ratio*, take these new curricular realities into consideration.

The first volume, *Understanding Our Being*, articulates a realist account of being, explores the special character of our human, personal being, and treats God as the source and end of being. It takes as a watchword John Paul II's comment that the "neglect of being…makes it possible to erase from the countenance of man and woman the marks of their likeness to God" (*Fides et ratio*, #89). Appended is the book's Introduction.

INTRODUCTION

Philosophy

This is a book of speculative philosophy; but what, the reader may ask, is that? From its Greek etymology ("philia," for "love," plus "sophia," for "wisdom"), the word "philosophy" means "love of wisdom." Wisdom, in turn, involves an understanding of ultimate matters—in particular, concerning our being, as well as concerning the ways of acting that are proper for humans, both as individuals and as communities. But just how we are to achieve such ultimate understanding has been the subject of a variety of proposals.

Throughout history, and across cultures, there have been many expressions of the search for wisdom. We might note, for example, the Vedas of ancient India, the sacred scriptures of the Jewish people, the teachings of Confucius and Lao-Tzu in China, as well as of the Buddha and his followers in India and East Asia. More recently, of course, there have appeared the Gospels of Christianity and the Koran of Muslim peoples. We also should note, within the heritage of the West, the discourses of the Greek philosophers (especially Plato and Aristotle), as well as those of later thinkers. Each of the above, we might say, has offered a path to understanding—a more or less formal and rigorous means by which persons concerned with ultimate matters might pursue their objective.

Catholic tradition distinguishes three types of wisdom: infused (or mystical) wisdom, theological wisdom, and philosophical wisdom.[1] The first must be received as a direct gift from God; the second can be acquired through a study of God's revelation in light of human experience and reflection; and the third, philosophical wisdom—with which we shall be concerned—is a work of human reason itself. As Aristotle pointed out (*Metaphysics*, Book I, Chap. 2), a search for the last-mentioned type of wisdom has its origin in *wonder*—wonder about how things are, and about the types of persons and communities we should strive to become. Moreover, philosophical wisdom is achieved, to the extent possible in this life, through rational analysis, reflection and theory related to the above-noted questions. For present purposes, therefore, *wisdom* (i.e., philosophical wisdom) can be defined as a very general understanding—arrived at via rational analysis, reflection and theory—concerning the way things ultimately are and the ways we humans ultimately should act.[2] And *philosophy* itself can be said to be a love of or a search for wisdom, understood in precisely this way.

In this book we develop and explore one approach to philosophical wisdom—an approach rooted, as noted in the Preface, in what the late Pope John Paul II termed the "great tradition."[3] Our special focus will be the dimension of that tradition represented by the school of St. Thomas Aquinas. But before undertaking this task, we should note a number of other preliminary points.

First, although there are wide differences in people's ways of reasoning about how things are, there also are certain remarkable affinities. Writers sometimes speak, therefore, of a "common sense" understanding that lies at the base of philosophy. In this vein, John Paul himself spoke of an "implicit philosophy" that is shared in some measure

by all and that thus "should serve as a kind of reference point for the different philosophical schools." Indeed, he went so far as to refer to "a core of philosophical insight" that includes, for example, "the principles of non-contradiction, finality and causality, as well as the concept of the person as a free and intelligent subject, with the capacity to know God, truth and goodness."[4] Some may wonder whether all people can be said to share, even implicitly, all of the ideas just noted. However, the success of such ventures as the United Nations' "Universal Declaration of Human Rights"[5] suggests that a common fund of human wisdom indeed is in some way possessed by all peoples. Moreover, regarding basic judgments and distinctions about reality, philosophical notions that are truly implicit in the common sense of all humankind (insofar as such notions can be discerned) are surely to be trusted, unless compelling evidence requires their rejection or revision.[6]

Another point of significance is the following. From the Middle Ages on, but especially in recent times, philosophy formally speaking has been held by most scholars to relate to a body of thought that in principle is available to all—irrespective, in particular, of their religious commitments or lack of such commitments. This is a key to what sometimes is referred to as philosophy's "autonomy." Thus, for a position or argument to be properly philosophical, it must be expressed in terms that represent (or allegedly represent) what is available to common human experience, as well as rational modes of reflection. Theories or understandings that require special insight or special data may well occupy theologians or, in their own ways, natural scientists and other specialists; but philosophical reflection is a work of human reason as such. Of course, to speak here of "common" experience is not to imply that the articulation and assessment

of such experience is easy. On the contrary, as we shall see, it is quite difficult. Moreover, due to various cultural factors, as well as the difficulty of the topics pursued, the various philosophical traditions and schools display considerable diversity: in their inspiration, their language and methodologies, and their specific results. Even within a single tradition or school, philosophers are liable to disagree on a number of finer points. And, while it may seem that nearly everyone can hope to increase to some extent his or her grasp of ultimate matters, it also seems that a "complete" understanding of subjects so broad and so deep is an ideal that can only progressively be approached, never finally achieved.

Lastly, we should mention that philosophers since the time of Aristotle have distinguished between *speculative* (or theoretical) wisdom and *practical* (especially moral) wisdom—and accordingly between the types of philosophy that pursue them. The former pursues an understanding about, as we have put it, "how things ultimately are;" the latter pursues an understanding about "how we humans ultimately should act." As suggested by the sub-title of our book, the present text will be concerned primarily with matters of the speculative sort.[7]

"Christian Philosophy" and the Perennial Tradition

Philosophy has interacted with Christian faith since the original preaching of the Gospel, when St. Paul encountered the philosophers of Athens at the Areopagus (see *Acts of the Apostles*, Chap. 17). Some early Church thinkers regarded "pagan" philosophies as simply false, and they held that Christian faith presented the "true philosophy." Others found in the writings of the philosophers arguments which, at least if suitably adapted,

might contribute to the promotion of faith—either by preparing minds and hearts to hear the Gospel, or by assisting in theological reflection upon it. Still others sought in the Christian message themes that might inspire properly human or rational lines of reflection that could be shared with all interested parties.

These various issues, trends, and emphases have been represented throughout Western history. During the 20th Century, in particular, there was considerable discussion as to whether there was, or could be, such a thing as "Christian philosophy"—especially in view of the prevailing understanding, noted above, of philosophy's autonomy vis-à-vis religious faith. Pope John Paul II's *Fides et ratio* (1998), written in the wake of these discussions, offered several helpful clarifications and proposals. (It may be noted that, during the early years of his career, the late pope, under his given name Karol Wojtyla, was himself a professor of philosophy at the Catholic University of Lublin in Poland.) Let us discuss a number of John Paul's central points about *Christian philosophy*—which may be characterized most simply as philosophy pursued in the context of Christian faith, or philosophy occurring in a Christian condition or state.

First of all, like other instances of the discipline, Christian philosophy is truly philosophy; in particular, it is to be distinguished from theology, both as to its content or object, and as to its sources and methods.[8] Philosophy treats those ultimate matters that can be understood, at least in principle, by human intellect or reason. Thus, when it speaks of God, philosophy does so only in terms of what can be known of God from the nature of the world, including the nature of our human selves. Theology, on the other hand, articulates and inquires into specific religious *mysteries*—for example (for Christians), God as Trinity or the Incarnation. Regarding sources and methods, philosophy

proceeds in terms of common human experience and "unaided" human reason; that is, it does not formally rely upon any religiously revealed propositions in its speculations or arguments. Theology, by contrast, while it may incorporate elements of philosophy, makes full use of what the believing community accepts as matters of faith.

The above points safeguard and indeed emphasize philosophy's autonomy. But religious faith nonetheless can play a role in the philosopher's work; and it can do so, according to John Paul, in two ways—"subjectively" and "objectively."[9] Regarding the former, one's Christian commitments can have a salutary effect on one's attitude toward the philosophical task and toward oneself as a person undertaking it. It might be suggested that it is an "occupational hazard" of philosophy that its practitioners may become prideful people: those who regularly pursue an understanding of "how things ultimately are" are very apt to have an elevated sense of self! Christian faith induces—or should induce—the virtue of humility, and with this an appropriately modest set of goals for one's rational understanding. Of course, as will be discussed below, the goals of Christian philosophy cannot be unduly modest; and a religious form of life will include, in addition to humility, the virtues of courage and hope—virtues that are important in facing the rigors of intellectual thought, to say nothing of the disappointments that often attend philosophers' efforts to reach agreement about their ideas and theories.

On the "objective" side, Christian faith can help to identify philosophical topics that otherwise might be left untreated. It is important to understand this point clearly. It does not take back the idea of philosophy's autonomy; it does not suggest, for example, that the philosopher formally presupposes any statements of faith, or uses them in his or her reasoning. But it stresses the fact that—as the history of philosophy itself confirms—

humankind's appreciation for, e.g., the splendor of existence, the dignity of human personhood, and the transcendence and the immanence of God as Creator, are enhanced when philosophical reflection upon these themes is pursued under the inspiration of faith.

Moreover, at least as it seemed to John Paul II, "the word of God"—that is, divine revelation—sets certain "requirements" for philosophies that aspire to be adequate to the vision it expresses. Three requirements in particular are mentioned in *Fides et ratio*.[10]

The first is that philosophies, and the persons pursuing them, should be mindful that they are called to a sapiential undertaking. The word "sapiential" comes from the Latin "sapientia," which means "wisdom." Thus here we find a reinforcement of the original and etymological understanding of "philosophy," as discussed at the outset. It is important, according to John Paul, to stress this discipline's search for wisdom in view of the temptation—so prevalent in the contemporary world—to regard all studies as specialized and fragmented, or as oriented toward solving technical problems, rather than toward probing the mysteries of the universe and ourselves. To avoid this result, philosophy must seek its rightful place as providing the "ultimate framework of the unity of knowledge and action, leading them to converge toward a final goal and meaning."[11] This is not to say that that philosophy, in and of itself, will succeed in producing a truly final account. Christian faith teaches that the directly revealed word of God (and thus theology) is necessary for an understanding of reality in its fullness. But philosophy should explore the naturally attainable aspects of—and thus in effect should prepare the way for—this more ultimate understanding.

The second requirement listed in *Fides et ratio* is that philosophy must recognize and authenticate the human capacity to "come to a knowledge which can reach objective

truth," or to "attain to reality itself as knowable."[12] According to this requirement, the philosopher operating in the context of Christian faith must seek to vindicate the mind's ability to grasp intelligible features of reality (rather than, e.g., merely apprehend and respond to sensory data) as well as the mind's ability, at least to some degree, to articulate reality's intelligible features.

A third requirement is said to follow from the preceding two—that philosophy should be "of genuinely metaphysical range;" that is, that it should seek to go beyond "the factual and the empirical" and come to know the "transcendent and metaphysical dimension in a way that is true and certain, albeit imperfect and analogical."[13] The term "metaphysical" comes from the Greek "meta" (meaning "beyond" or "coming after") plus "phusika" (meaning "the physical" in the very general sense of what happens within or according to nature). Now, the philosopher must recognize certain limits regarding both the quality and the type of knowledge that can be developed in a metaphysical way (notice that John Paul II called such knowledge "imperfect and analogical"); but the philosopher also must—if his or her work is to cohere with "the word of God"—push on toward a result that is truly fundamental.

Summarizing these points, we may say that John Paul called on philosophy 1) to return to its original task, which arises out of human wonder, of seeking wisdom; 2) to pursue this task by way of developing and authenticating a genuine knowledge of reality; and 3) to understand that philosophical knowledge must transcend the phenomena of nature and aspire to be metaphysical or foundational. Of course, one need not accept these three requirements in order to be called a philosopher. And many, as we shall see,

do not. But a Christian philosopher, as here understood, will accept these requirements—at least in principle and insofar as they bear on the subjects of his or her inquiries.

A little later in *Fides et ratio*, the late pope acknowledged that accepting the above tasks can appear daunting—especially in the present intellectual climate, which includes a good deal of skepticism about the very possibility of the approach to philosophy being advocated. But he suggested that philosophers who respond to this call can look to the "great tradition" that precedes them. More fully, and more specifically, he wrote as follows: "I believe that those philosophers who wish to respond today to the demands which the word of God makes on human thinking should develop their thought…in organic continuity with the great tradition which, beginning with the ancients, passes through the Fathers of the Church and the masters of Scholasticism and includes the fundamental achievements of modern and contemporary thought."[14] John Paul went on to list as models of Christian philosophers who have engaged contemporary intellectual culture such 20th Century figures as Jacques Maritain, Etienne Gilson, and St. Edith Stein.[15]

One aspect of this "great tradition" consists in what has been called the *perennial philosophy* (in Latin, "philosophia perennis").[16] This term suggests both a wisdom that is available to all historical periods and cultures, and a wisdom that is in need of regular renewal. Indeed, one of the thinkers just mentioned, Jacques Maritain, called the perennial philosophy a tradition that "is eternally young and always inventive, and involves a fundamental need, inherent in its very being, to grow and renew itself" in every age.[17]

This tradition, as John Paul II noted, began with the ancient philosophers, Plato and especially Aristotle. It continued, informed by Christian faith, in certain early writers

of the Church—in particular St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430). And it came to maturity in the Christian Middle Ages, after Aristotle's thought was re-introduced into the West by way of Islamic and Byzantine Greek sources. For many, a high point in the development of the perennial tradition came in the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas (1224–1275), a priest of the Dominican order who taught at the University of Paris, counseled popes, and wrote voluminously on both philosophical and theological topics. (John Paul devoted two full sections of his 1998 document to Aquinas's achievement.)

At the heart of the perennial philosophy is a *realism* (recall the second "requirement" for Christian philosophy noted above); this may be characterized as holding that the human mind can and typically does make contact with the real, and that its judgments can and typically do have a reliability and a truth-value that go beyond the mere expression of sensations and ideas. In developing this position, the tradition, at its best, has avoided realisms that are "naïve" or "one-dimensional." It has recognized, that is, a need to critique human judgments, as well as to attend to diversity in the modes of being and, correspondingly, in the modes of human knowing and articulating being.

In the later Middle Ages, and throughout most of the Modern period, the perennial philosophy somewhat languished. Except for the work of a few key figures (e.g., Cajetan and John of St. Thomas) this tradition was kept alive primarily by repetition and codification, rather than—as Maritain would have urged—by growing and renewing itself in keeping with the age. Following the call of Pope Leo XIII in the encyclical *Aeterni patris* (1879), attention once again was paid to the authentic thought of the Medieval masters, in particular Aquinas, as well as to ways their thought might interact

with that of modern philosophers. Here one might mention, for example, the historical studies of Gilson[18] and the creative philosophical explorations of Maritain.[19]

Up to and including the decade of Vatican Council II (1962-65), such perennial philosophy held pride of place in Catholic colleges and universities in this country. With the "opening of windows" initiated by Pope John XXIII, there occurred in succeeding years (indeed, it had already begun) much ferment in Catholic thought, philosophical as well as in theological. The result has been a good deal of diversity and uncertainty (some would say chaos) in Catholic intellectual circles. John Paul II's 1998 encyclical clearly called for another renewal of the perennial philosophy (as well as a parallel revitalization of fundamental theology) at the outset of the 21st Century—a renewal that would produce, as we might put it, "new blossoms" on the stem of the great tradition.

We ourselves hope to contribute to such a renewal, and especially to help make it available to students. But before doing so we should note the presence of a variety of contrary trends in contemporary intellectual culture. These trends in effect challenge the very possibility of the philosophical enterprise that John Paul so strongly recommended. At this point, we can merely identify and sketch the general features of these movements of thought; they will receive greater attention—as well as critical discussion and response—in the main parts of the book to follow.

21st Century Challenges and Opportunities

Toward the end of *Fides et ratio*, John Paul himself specifically mentioned a number of challenges to the perennial tradition. For purposes of our discussion, such

challenges may be gathered into three general groups. The following are perhaps the most significant in each, with brief characterizations provided by the present writer.[20]

In the first group are to be found *scientism* and associated positions. "Scientism," it should be noted, is to be distinguished from "science." The latter term can be used of any organized body of knowledge and theory; today, of course, it is applied especially to studies that are rooted in precise observations of the physical world. Scientism, on the other hand, is a philosophical view. It makes a claim about the nature and limits of knowledge—specifically, the claim that all genuine knowledge is to be achieved through the methods of the natural sciences, i.e., methods that are "empirical" or, as they are also called, "positive." Now, genuine science—at least when properly employed—is not a threat to any person or any sound form of thought; indeed, it has proven to be a great boon to humankind. But scientism would render impossible or ineffectual any other approaches to the knowledge of reality—e.g., ones that are philosophical or theological. In particular, it would reject, as John Paul put it, "the [philosophical] notion of being in order to clear the way for pure and simple facticity."[21] And a restriction to pure and simple "facticity" would eliminate metaphysical aspirations such as those discussed above.

A scientist, it should be clear, need not accept the philosophy of scientism. (Likewise, a person need not be a scientist in order to be a proponent of scientism.) But some scientists in fact do accept and promote this general view—for example, the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins and the physical chemist Peter Atkins. The latter gives a particularly clear expression of the "scientistic" position (by contrast with a properly "scien-

tific" one) when he states that his orientation toward the knowledge of reality springs from a "belief that science is all-competent."[22]

As noted just above, the natural sciences are sometimes also referred to as "positive" sciences. Here we should mention a related challenge to the perennial philosophy called *positivism*. One form of this challenge, inspired by the 19th Century French thinker Auguste Comte, emphasizes a supposed lack of practical value in any speculations beyond matters "posited" by the sciences. Another form of positivism, even more extreme in its theoretical views, is logical positivism. First developed by the "Vienna Circle," a group of scientists and philosophers in Austria in the 1930's, logical positivism holds that the very meaningfulness of a word or statement is to be called into question if it cannot be expressed in terms that admit of empirical verification.

Scientism is also associated with *reductionism*, which holds that all the elements of one order of thought can be reduced to, and explained within, another order—for example, and in particular, that the whole of what we refer to as the "mental" or "psychical" can be reduced to the material or physical. (For obvious reasons, this particular form of reductionism also is characterized as a kind of *materialism* or *physicalism*.)

Clearly, scientism and associated views, as we have briefly described them, are serious threats to the perennial philosophy—a philosophy that holds, as *Fides et ratio* put it, that the human mind can and should orient itself toward "the transcendent…dimension" of reality, not simply toward the empirical dimension.

A second group of contemporary challenges includes what are known as *historicism* and *progressivism*. Such views hold that ideas and practices that develop later in human history are probably or even necessarily better; or, alternatively, that at least in the

long run humankind inevitably makes progress. Now, as regards a detailed knowledge of the physical world, historicism makes good sense. However, if the question is one of philosophical wisdom as earlier described, the matter is—to say the least—not so clear. Moreover, an embracing of historicism would be incompatible with the honoring of an intellectual tradition that began with ancient thinkers. Regarding progressivist views about the human project—e.g., those of Marxists and certain positivists (those who hold, in John Paul II's words, that "thanks to scientific and technical progress, man and woman may live as a demiurge, single-handedly and completely taking charge of their destiny"[23]) —it can readily be seen that such views would be incompatible with Christian faith. After all, this faith emphasizes the vicissitudes and uncertainties of the human project, while at the same time offering a supernatural hope (by contrast with a purely natural one) for humanity's fulfillment.

Although not explicitly mentioned by John Paul II in the document from which we have been quoting, a further trend can be associated with the ones just mentioned. This is the trend called *secularism*. So far from embracing any type of supernatural hope, secularists regard the very idea of a realm beyond the natural as a mere vestige of past modes of thought. For secularism (from the Latin "saecula," meaning "the ages"), temporal reality is all there is—or at any rate it is all that should concern us as human beings. (It should be noted that an acceptance, as in Western democracies, of the idea of a "secular order"—including, in particular, a this-world and a human centered form of government—does not in itself entail secularism; for one can recognize the proper autonomy of the present realm and at the same time hold that it depends upon and answers to a realm that is "higher." The latter view, in fact, was the one expressed by the American

founders in the Declaration of Independence.) Secularism, by contrast, rules the idea of higher realm out of play. Thus it is, like historicism and progressivism, a trend that challenges any renewal of the perennial philosophy, especially if this renewal is in any way associated with religious faith.

A third cluster of challenges includes *relativism* or, as John Paul II also called it, "undifferentiated pluralism." Any educated person today recognizes that people—individuals and groups, as well as whole cultures and civilizations—are divided by beliefs and attitudes. Sometimes the divisions seem quite fundamental. However, the relativist holds that this is the case not only in fact, but also in principle. That is, the relativist argues that there is no way of showing that any one fundamental view is correct and others incorrect or false; indeed, such a thinker holds that there is no rational basis even for preferring one fundamental belief to another. Relativism also is incompatible with the philosophy of the "great tradition," which maintains that there is, in fact, objective truth about ultimate matters—even if such truth is very difficult to formulate and establish in a manner persuasive to all. (Significantly, John Paul's successor—Pope Benedict XVI, the former Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger—also has consistently expressed this point. In a speech just before the Conclave at which he was elected pope, he warned of the dangers to the contemporary world of what he termed a "dictatorship of relativism.")

Beyond the sociological data alluded to above, another source of today's relativism is the school of philosophy called "atheistic existentialism." Writers of this school, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, hold that there is no essential reality to human persons or other types of being, because there is no God to conceive such essential realities. Rather, each human individual determines—and cannot avoid determining—what his or

her "essence" will be. At this rate, clearly, there can be no objective justification of any philosophical framework. Supposed "wisdoms" or "understandings of being" will be irreducibly plural because they are simply and freely chosen.

John Paul II also referred to *postmodernism*. As the name suggests, this cultural trend—especially popular in Western Europe but also represented in the United States—springs from a rejection of the supposed certainties propounded by certain modern philosophers, especially those called "rationalists." The latter sought to establish systems of truth deductively from sets of a priori principles.[24] According to postmodernism, all such efforts must be consigned to a prior age of thought. As expressed by French think-ers Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, as well as by the American Richard Rorty, the postmodern philosophy claims that all forms of knowledge and speech are embedded in particular viewpoints. Thus, once again, it is impossible to ground, or even to claim rational priority for, one's preferred understanding of reality. It is interesting to note John Paul's reaction to these ideas. He wrote that while in their fullness they obviously conflict with both Christianity and traditional speculative philosophy, "the currents of thought which claim to be postmodern merit appropriate attention."[25] That is (at least as this writer interprets the pope's remarks), there is something correct in rejecting an overemphasis upon reason. However, the thinkers who call themselves "postmodern" generally carry this theme too far. Indeed, they tend to fall into the position called "nihilism."

It is *nihilism*, according to John Paul II, that is the ultimate challenge to perennial philosophy—as indeed to contemporary religious faith. Derived from the Latin word "nihil," meaning "nothing," this term expresses "a denial of the humanity and the very identity of the human being."[26] To put the matter in a slightly different way, nihilists

hold that human life and indeed the whole universe are purposeless or totally without meaning. As indicated in a passage quoted on the epigraph page of this book (taken from *Fides et ratio*, section 90), John Paul attributed the rise of the nihilist philosophy to a "neglect of being." Such neglect, he said, has had the effect of erasing from people's awareness "the marks of their likeness to God." This in turn has led individuals and whole cultures "either to a destructive will to power or to a solitude without hope."

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche—who wrote just over a hundred years ago and who coined the phrase "will to power"[27]—often is said to be the founder of nihilism. This may or may not be historically accurate. One thing that is clear, however, is that events of the 21st Century are shaking civilization to its core. Thus any renewal of the perennial philosophy will need to seek, and to articulate, a common basis of human meaning in the world.

From the side of religion itself come other challenges to the perennial tradition. One such challenge John Paul II called *biblicism* (see *Fides et ratio*, section 55); in this country it is better known as (biblical) *fundamentalism*. According to this view, all relevant knowledge about our being already has been expressed in the Bible, which (for fundamentalists) is to be interpreted literally in all its parts. Thus rational analyses and reflections based on common human experience—such as those called for by philosophy—are held to be quite unnecessary, and even, perhaps, dangerous to the religious faith of those who participate in such modes of thought.

Another challenge—closely related to biblicism or fundamentalism—is *fideism*. This last term, which comes from the Latin "fides," meaning "faith," refers to the position that religious questions, and more generally all questions about transcendent matters,

are to be settled by sheer faith, unsupported by human reasoning. It may be noted that Christianity always has had adherents who have adopted such a position. (See, for example, the passages from the ancient Christian writer Tertullian, and from the 19th Century Danish writer Soren Kierkegaard, in the volume by Paul Helm mentioned in the section on Further Reading, below.) Moreover, the Christian life obviously is rooted in an entrusting of oneself to God as revealed in Jesus Christ: his words, his deeds, and the traditions of his Church. This, however, does not entail that reason has no important role to play in the life of faith. And fideism, taken as a general position, is incompatible with the traditional search for a "harmony" between faith and reason, and especially with the idea that philosophy—a work of reason—can make substantive contributions to this harmony.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are those who hold to a purely metaphorical, or figurative, or symbolic interpretation of Biblical and similar texts. This line of interpretation—sometimes called *non-cognitivism*, since it takes religious terms to be rooted in the exercise of emotion or poetic creativity, rather than in acts of knowledge—poses a challenge that is equally obvious. For there can be, on its view, no literal or designative language, i.e., no language that expresses its object by way of a genuine concept, either about God or about the world's relations with God. Of course, much religious language, in its original and continuing use, clearly is figurative and symbolic in character. And such language does involve both a strong emotional dimension and the use of the resources of the poet. But on the severe restrictions proposed by non-cognitivism (which we also will call "symbolicism"), no realist interpretation of ultimate language would be

possible; its meaning, that is to say, would forever be shrouded in the mists of image and metaphor.

It perhaps needless is to say—but it is worth pointing out—that analogues to these various challenges arise for philosophers, or students of philosophy, from other religious traditions. Thus, for example, there is to be noted within Islam a kind of fundamentalism and a kind of fideism related to the Koran. And a Hindu devotee may well consider just how literally or how symbolically the stories of the many gods of his or her ancient and multi-layered religion are to be understood. Moreover, all religious traditions—including the primarily oral traditions of Native American and other indigenous peoples—are challenged by contemporary movements such as scientism, secularism, and nihilism.

We see, then, that thinkers interested in redeveloping the perennial philosophy (as well as thinkers from other cultural contexts with whom they might engage in positive dialogue) face many significant challenges. But it is important to note that there are, in these early years of the 21st Century, genuine opportunities as well. A number of recently developed types of philosophy have shown promise of making contributions to the ongoing tradition. Prominent examples would be phenomenology, personalism, and some strands of linguistic or analytic philosophy. *Phenomenology*, according to its practitioners, seeks to record and to reflect upon the realities of experience as immediately apprehended, apart from intervening conceptual apparatus. Philosophers called *personalists* stress the unique features and possibilities of human personal and interpersonal life—e.g., encounter in dialogue, communion with others, and the higher forms of love and self-giving. For their part, *analytic* philosophers emphasize careful attention to the analysis of

language as the key to progress in philosophy—an emphasis in part shared, as we shall see, by Aristotle, Aquinas, and others in the Scholastic tradition.

In his own early philosophical work, John Paul II himself was influenced by phenomenology and personalism. He regularly made use of themes from these philosophical schools—as well as from that of Aquinas—in his various writings. Other phenomenologists and personalists associated with Catholic thought are St. Edith Stein, Dietrich von Hildebrand, Gabriel Marcel, and, in this country, John Crosby. The insights of analytic philosophy have been made available to the "great tradition" through the work of English-speaking philosophers such as Elizabeth Anscombe, Peter Geach, John Haldane, and, in this country, Eleanore Stump. It perhaps should be said that none of these newer philosophies is particularly strong in what John Paul termed the "metaphysical dimension." However, insofar as their insights might be grafted onto the perennial philosophy the prospects for the latter's enrichment seem bright. In the present book, we will incorporate certain points from these newer movements when they illuminate the topics in question.

Equally important, in the judgment of the present author, is a noticeable renewal among students and young adults of a desire for such human wisdom as may be available. (This comes after a period marked by much random intellectual experimentation, or, alternatively, ennui.) It is especially to such readers, who seek a philosophical approach to "understanding our being," that this book is addressed. Our aim is to develop in some detail one such approach—not the only such approach, to be sure, but one that the author hopes is well articulated and accessible to the reader, as well as one that is in continuity with the perennial tradition. Our effort in effect responds to *Fides et ratio*'s

concluding call: "I appeal…to philosophers, and to all teachers of philosophy, asking them to have the courage to recover, in the flow of an enduringly valid philosophical tradition, the range of authentic wisdom and truth—metaphysical truth included—which is proper to philosophical enquiry."[28]

In articulating this philosophical approach, we shall make use of the works of recent writers of other types or schools insofar as they supplement, or correct in matters of detail, or facilitate a helpful contemporary expression of, basic ideas of St. Thomas Aquinas. That is—with due respect for those who adopt other paths to wisdom—our presentation, on essential matters, will be "Thomist."[29]

Our touchstone for the interpretation and development of Aquinas's speculative thought will be the work of the 20th Century Thomist Jacques Maritain, as well as his students Yves R. Simon and Pierre-Marie Emonet. As it happens, all three of these writers were Frenchmen by birth, although both Maritian and Simon spent many years in the United States and Simon became a naturalized citizen. Their work is continued in meetings and publications of the American Catholic Philosophical Association and, more particularly, the American Maritain Association. Also of relevance to the perennial philosophy are articles in the journals The Thomist, American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly (formerly The New Scholasticism), The Modern Schoolman, and the recently inaugurated Nova et Vetera.

We would re-emphasize at the outset of this book that, while the "great tradition" of philosophy to which we seek to contribute has flourished under the inspiration of Christianity, as philosophy there is nothing essentially or formally Christian about it. Supposing it to be viable, it in principle is available to all, regardless of religious tradition

or lack thereof. In a very few sections we shall explicitly pursue certain religious and theological concerns. For the rest, our proposals will be strictly philosophical. Indeed, it will be a relevant criticism of them as philosophical if they seem formally to depend, in whole or in part, on a revelation accepted in faith.

As suggested above, the present book also will attend to other positions—including ones opposed to our own—that have become prominent in recent times. In this way the student can experience the interplay of philosophical arguments and themes, and at the same time judge, at least in a preliminary way, whether our brief responses to competing views are cogent. Thus, it is hoped, the student himself or herself will be drawn into the life of philosophy.

In keeping with John Paul II's call for a philosophy "of genuinely metaphysical range," Part 1 of this book is devoted to the philosophy of Being. Here we shall consider the ways we can know being, the constitutive principles of being itself, and other very general themes of perennial philosophy. In Part 2 we apply a number of these themes in developing an account of our Personal Being. We shall especially be concerned to note the features—and the apparent implications of the features—discovered in our human powers of knowing and willing, as well as in our distinctive modes of sociality. In Part 3 we turn to philosophical reflection about God, understood as Being's Source and End. Here we shall pursue the topics of reasoning to God's existence, the nature of statements about God, difficulties regarding God's providence and creative activity in light of evil in the world, and, finally, the idea of a divine revelation that would respond to our continuing quest for self-understanding.

Our final section is an Epilogue concerning prospects for dialogue among world cultures and religions, and concerning the role of philosophy in such dialogue. This theme is suggested by topics in Part 3, as well as by the communal nature of our world (and the ever-increasing diversity within our own country), together with the consequent need for intercultural understanding. In the document from which we have been quoting, John Paul II pointed out that "philosophical thought is often the only ground for understanding and dialogue" with those who do not share one's faith; and that such thought might provide a basis for "clear and honest collaboration between Christians and the followers of other religions and all those who, while not sharing a religious belief, have at heart the renewal of humanity."[30] The present writer shares the hope thus expressed. Since readers of this book are likely to represent a range of cultural and religious backgrounds, they will be in a position to discuss the value of suggestions we make about these matters—and to make suggestions of their own.

After this rather lengthy Introduction, we now are ready to begin exploring the perennial philosophy and its approach to "understanding our being."

Summary

- *Philosophy is a search for wisdom that formally relies on common human experience and modes of reasoning. Speculative philosophy seeks an understanding of being, or of the way things ultimately are.*
- *"Christian philosophy" is to be distinguished from theology, although it can take inspiration from and pursue its topics in light of religious faith.*
- *The "perennial" tradition of philosophy draws upon earlier expressions of*

wisdom (in particular that of St. Thomas Aquinas), while seeking to renew itself in the context of contemporary intellectual culture.

- *A number of challenges to perennial philosophy arise today—e.g., scientism, historicism, and nihilism; trends among certain religious believers (fideism, fundamentalism, and non-cognitivism) also call this approach into question.*
- *In a highly pluralistic world, philosophy perhaps offers the best hope for mutual understanding and dialogue.*

Questions for Reflection

1. Given the understanding of philosophical wisdom articulated in this Introduction, how close do you think a person might come to actually achieving it? Are people of certain backgrounds or temperaments more likely to make progress in philosophy than others? Explain.

2. Suppose a critic of the idea of Christian philosophy says, "You let religion influence your thinking, but I go by reason alone and thus am able to produce a purer form of philosophy." How might a Christian philosopher (or a philosopher from some other religious tradition) respond to this; and how cogent would the response be?

3. Of the various challenges to the "great tradition" identified by John Paul II and discussed in this Introduction, which do you regard as the most significant or the most threatening? Why?

4. Might the position identified as "fideism" be appropriate in relation to certain types of transcendent matters, but not others? Alternatively, should reason play a role

even in our decisions about accepting teachings that are proposed as specifically religious? Explain.

5. At this early point in our study, what do you think of the possibilities of intercultural and interreligious dialogue? Do you see any concrete ways in which philosophy might be helpful in this undertaking?

Further Reading

Ciapolo, Roman T., ed. *Postmodernism and Christian Philosophy* (Washington, DC: American Maritain Association/The Catholic University of America Press, 1997).

Gilson, Etienne. *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Random House, 1956).

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Wippel, John F. "The Possibility of a Christian Philosophy: A Thomistic Perspective," *Faith and Philosophy* 1 (1984): 272-290.

Wojtyla, Karol (John Paul II). *Person and Community*, Selected Essays trans. by Theresa Sandok, OSM (New York: Peter Lang, 1993).

Notes

[1] On this matter, see Jacques Maritain, *Science and Wisdom*, translated by Bernard Wall (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1940), especially pp. 22–25.

[2] As an aid to the student, terms introduced in *italics*, along with brief accounts of their meanings, are gathered together in the book's Glossary. Additionally, the number of the page on which a term's fullest characterization appears is listed in **boldface** type in the book's Index.

[3] See John Paul II, *Fides et ratio* [On the Relationship between Faith and Reason], Vatican translation (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1998), section 85, p. 107.

[4] John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, section 4, pp. 12-13.

[5] United Nations Organization, "Universal Declaration on Human Rights" (1948).

[6] We would emphasize that we are here speaking of common sense understandings about basic and general philosophical matters. The present statement does not hold regarding the more particular beliefs and hypotheses investigated by the natural sciences; nor does it hold of certain images often associated with common sense. (As we shall see, these distinctions are important in several philosophical subject areas.)

[7] In preparation is a companion text, Achieving the Good: An Introduction to Moral Philosophy in the Perennial Tradition.

[8] John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, section 9, pp. 18-19. This understanding of the distinction between hilosophy and theology has been common in Catholic thought since the time of St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-74); it was formally recognized by the First Vatican Council in the document *Dei Filius*, IV.

[9] *Ibid*., section 76, pp. 95-97.

[10] *Ibid*., sections 80–85, pp. 100-108.

[11] *Ibid*., section 81, p. 102.

[12] *Ibid*., section 82, p. 103.

[13] *Ibid*., section 83, p. 104.

[14] *Ibid*., section 85, p. 107. (Emphasis added.)

[15] *Ibid*., section 74, p. 93.

[16] This term in its present usage appears to derive from the historian of philosophy Maurice de Wolf; for a recent account, see the article "philosophia perennis" by Ralph McInerny ("R.M.") in Robert Audi, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 580. In at least one place in his early writings, Karol Wojtyla/John Paul II himself refers to the "philosophia perennis" and the "Thomist school;" and he identified himself with them. See "The Human Person and Natural Law" (1970), in Karol Wojtyla, Person and Community, trans. Theresa Sandok, OSM (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), p. 181. Moreover, in the official Latin text of *Fides et ratio*, the heading for the paragraphs directly focused on the thought of Aquinas (#43 – 44) reads: "Perennis sancti Thomae Aquinatis sententiarum novitas."

[17] Jacques Maritain, *A Preface to Metaphysics* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1945), p. 2.

[18] See, for example, Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*

(New York: Random House, 1956).

[19] In addition to the works mentioned in notes 1 and 17 above, see, for example, Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, translated under the supervision of Gerald B. Phelan, with a new Introduction by Ralph McInerny (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995); and *Integral Humanism*, translated by Joseph W. Evans (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968).

[20] It should be noted that the various "-isms" here discussed are to be understood as general types; it is not implied that every thinker who might be categorized in a certain way holds exactly the position described.

[21] John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, section 88, p. 110.

[22] Peter Atkins, "Purposeless People," in Arthur Peacocke and Grant Gillett, eds., *Persons and Personality* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 13.

[23] John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, section 91, p. 113.

[24] We shall explore modern "rationalism" in section 1.1 of this book. For a good, brief account of postmodernism (and one that is helpful for our purposes), see Rosalind Smith Edman, "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Thomism Confront Questions of Gender," in *Postmodernism and Christian Philosophy*, ed. Roman T. Ciapalo (Washington, DC: American Maritain Association/The Catholic University of America Press, 1997), p. 101.

[25] John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, section 91, p. 113.

[26] *Ibid*., section 90, p. 111.

[27] See Nietzsche's book *The Will to Power*, trans. by A. M. Ludovici, in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. by O. Levy (New York: Macmillan, 1924).

[28] John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, section 106, p. 128.

[29] John Paul II was careful to point out that, while certain philosophies are incompatible with Christian faith, the Church does not require adherence to a "specific school" of thought (*Ibid*., section 83, p. 104). Moreover, regarding Aquinas's philosophy itself, it is not always a simple matter to determine what counts as "essential." However, insofar as other philosophies do reject Aquinas's thought, or alter it in essential ways, they would not strictly speaking fall under our concept of "perennial" philosophy—although they might be part of what John Paul II called the "great tradition" more broadly conceived.

[30] *Ibid*., section 104, pp. 125-26.