

A Key to Balthasar

**Hans Urs von Balthasar on Beauty,
Goodness, and Truth**

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Foreword

I started reading Balthasar at the very beginning of my study of theology. In many ways, this was trying to run before one could walk. I didn't have the background or the tools to do proper justice to what I read. I should really have recognised that the demands of the ideas were too much for me. I was certainly aware that only by very painful plodding could I make out anything at all of what was going on in the German text. In those far off days (I am speaking of 1970), one had to plunge into the German original unless one was going just to stick with some of Balthasar's essays or shorter and easier books, like, for example, his study of St Thérèse of Lisieux – actually, quite an important one because it is where he tells what a *theological* biography of a saint should be, and why.

The German original of Balthasar's *Glory*, in all its multi-volume massiveness, was put into my hands quite out of the blue, by a former fellow-undergraduate at Christ Church, Oxford, a man of singular generosity of heart (and, evidently, purse!). I remember gazing at the handsome maroon books on my shelf at Blackfriars in St Giles' Street and wondering whether I should ever penetrate their mysteries. Why, in my very amateur way, did I persevere?

We were living in something of an ice-age for Catholic theology. At any rate in the Thames Valley, a spiritual chill had descended in place of the Pentecostal warmth the Second Vatican Council was supposed to have communicated. The theology we heard most about (not that our Dominican teachers were necessarily enthusiasts for it) was critical theology. It was what would now be called theology practiced in terms of a 'hermeneutic of discontinuity'. At its worst, it was angrily dismissive of the theology of the past. At its best, it offered a minimal, pared-down version of the older content. The Fathers were sunk in Hellenism, St Thomas ruined by rationalism, later writers

oscillated between piety and the seminary manual. There was not much to be expected in all this for ‘modern man’.

At least one modern man found there wasn’t much for him in critical theology either. Surely, this humanistic make-over couldn’t be all that Catholic Christianity had to offer the life of the spirit, the life of the believing intelligence? It was to try to get closer to the sheer spiritual greatness of the revelation to which the art of the Church and the historic liturgies bore witness that I (and, I am sure, others) turned towards Balthasar. That was why I continued to look longingly at those mute maroon covers.

Something I have discovered over the years is that if you want to understand something, the best way is often to teach it, or, failing that, to write about it. I have tried to write about most of Balthasar’s corpus, from his early studies of philosophy and art to his famous ‘trilogy’, and beyond that, the remainder of his theological output which precedes, accompanies and (in the case of a small number of texts) comes after that trilogy. Here, however, I want to do something different – based mainly on material I first put together for a course of lectures at the John Paul II Institute in Melbourne (Australia) some few years ago.

The aim is to provide a key (please note the indefinite article!) to Balthasar by identifying some basic words that structure his trilogy – the three-part project which, on any version of his achievement, occupies a central place in what he was trying to do. Although it is freer than the strict expository style I adopted in the five more substantial books on his corpus I published earlier (Chapter Four is the most disciplined in this respect), I hope it captures much that is useful in what Balthasar sought to say. The trilogy turns on beauty, goodness, and truth. It was because Balthasar’s work struck me as all three of entrancingly beautiful, encouraging to goodness and expressive of truth, that I did not give up an effort I have found, as a priest and preacher, enormously worthwhile. And I should add that, while, no doubt, other Fathers, doctors, and approved intellectual luminaries in the Church have said some things better, Balthasar, by his

admiration for his predecessors and his manifold use of them, made us love them too and so rediscover the whole Tradition.

Blackfriars, Cambridge
Feast of SS Philip and James, 2010

Chapter One

Key-word ‘Being’:

Balthasar and the Transcendentals

Introduction

Balthasar’s theology has as its universally recognised centre-piece his theological trilogy: in English, *The Glory of the Lord*, *Theo-drama* and *Theo-logic*¹. Those three works need to be placed all together on one’s book-shelf – which will have to be a stout one to bear their weight! Some recent German writers call *The Glory of the Lord* the ‘Theo-aesthetics’, and while that is not the title Balthasar chose, it does bring out the way each of these multi-volume efforts is parallel to the others. His theological trilogy, perhaps the high-point of twentieth-century Catholic theology, revolves around three ‘transcendental’ qualities or determinations of being: the beautiful, the good, and the true.

‘Transcendental’, as used by Balthasar, is not a word that need frighten us. It means, simply, *universal*, in the sense of that which is not confined by but goes beyond (*transcends*) all particular categories. To approach these matters, we can start from a very basic point. Balthasar thinks that despite (or is it owing to?) our human perspective, we can succeed in grasping being, the bed-rock of reality, and that we can do so by way of the senses – seeing, touching, hearing, scenting, tasting – these humble, but also fascinating, faculties which, surely, delight more than they repel. We come into intellectual contact with being, helped by the senses, in and through particular, concrete things. Philosophically, then, Balthasar is an *epistemological optimist* – he holds that our powers of knowing are reliable. And likewise he is an *ontological realist* – he considers that those

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powers give us access to things as they really are: participations, varying in scope and intensity, in being itself. And he would add, along with all metaphysicians in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the Ground and Source of such being is God. So the activity of our seemingly lowly senses goes together with access to comprehensive, and even ultimate, reality. As he wrote:

No metaphysics of Being as such and its transcendental qualities can be separated from concrete experience, which is always of the senses. 'The True', the disclosure of Being in its totality, only becomes visible where a particular thing is adjudged true. The goodness of Being is only visible where one meets with some good thing which both brings 'the Good' near and – through its finitude, fragility and relative 'badness' – causes it to retreat again. And we know that there is beauty from the sensuous experience which presents and withdraws it, reveals and again conceals it, evanescent, in myriad layers ...²

Balthasar's approach can be contrasted here with the Kant-inspired methodology of subject-oriented philosophical humanism and, in the Catholic context, the influential movement of philosophical theology known as 'Transcendental Thomism'. These have it in common that they begin their epistemological reflections by examining human subjectivity from within – on the basis of what has been called the 'I'-'I' relationship.³ Balthasar, however, puts the human subject – and that by virtue of its created nature – in immediate relation with the truth that lies outside itself. The self-conscious subject exists, knowing that he or she exists as just such a unique subject, yes. But this is always *in relation to other manifestations of being*.

Indeed, our first conscious recognition of ourselves, our 'I', is, so Balthasar suggests, through our relation with another: namely, the human parent. As he put it in 'A Résumé of my Thought' (a useful essay indeed for so prolific and sometimes prolix an author):

[M]an exists only in dialogue with his neighbour. The infant is brought to consciousness of himself only by love, by the smile of his mother. In that encounter 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 love is good, therefore all being is good; (3) that love is true, therefore all being is true; (4) that love evokes joy, therefore all being is beautiful.⁴

We can take it that in these remarks Balthasar is moving within an intellectual space which may broadly be described as in the tradition of St Thomas Aquinas, the 'universal and common doctor' of the Catholic Church. The passage presumes as its background a participation metaphysic of the sort St Thomas used increasingly in his work, albeit refining it in the process. Thus a Dutch Thomas interpreter from the contemporary 'School of Utrecht' can remark:

Insofar as a creature is a being by participation and derives its being from God who is essential being, it is also good by participation, and by an intrinsic form which is a likeness of God's essential goodness.⁵

When we compare this quotation from the rather celebrated one from Balthasar about the mother's smile, we notice that Balthasar is working with a wider number of transcendentals: not just one (the transcendental 'goodness') but four. As he writes in his essay 'Revelation and the Beautiful':

The light of the transcendentals, unity, truth, goodness and beauty, a light at one with the light of philosophy, can only shine if it is undivided.⁶

Beauty, goodness, unity, and truth are, in the last analysis, inseparable. I should add what the alert reader may well come to

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notice: among these qualities, *unity* seems the poor relation in Balthasar's account, or at any rate it does not get, so far as explicit treatment is concerned, an equal share of the cake. Balthasar's principal theological work is a trilogy – on divine beauty, divine goodness, divine truth, and the modes in which these are manifested in creation and salvation. It is not, then, a tetralogy; there is no corresponding series of volumes inspired by the transcendental 'unity'. But this is not because Balthasar is uninterested in that topic. It is, rather, because his quite passionate interest in the topic takes an unexpected guise. The transcendental we call 'unity' finds expression in the holism of reality – and this for Balthasar is true above all of the holistic character of the reality that is Christian revelation. This is the real at its most comprehensively complete. In this sense, each of the works in the trilogy is concerned with *unum*, 'the one', since, as the German Balthasar commentator Thomas Schumacher writes, 'in its own special perspective, each part of the trilogy makes explicit (in a way both philosophical and theological) reality as a whole'⁷. Furthermore, so we may add, the transcendental we call 'unity' shows itself in the manner in which beauty, goodness, and truth, wherever found, are indivisibly *one*.

How do we know? Thomas, for his part, has an adage to the effect that, *whatever* is known – and that would include, then, a grasp of the transcendentals – is known according to the knower's capacity. Balthasar certainly accepts that, in the individual subject's perception of the being of things, the degree of understanding found will turn on certain subjective conditions being met within that individual. But while such a view – even in St Thomas – could be construed as offering an opening to Idealism as represented by Kant, what decisively demarcates Balthasar's thought from Idealism is his insistence that the 'first prerequisite for understanding is to accept what is given just as it offers itself'⁸. That is how he puts it in the opening volume of *The Glory of the Lord*, his study of the beautiful. Every reality furnishes proof of its existence by virtue of what he calls:

the objective evidence that emerges and sheds its light from the phenomenon itself, and not the sort of evidence that is recognised in the process of satisfying the subject's needs.⁹

Nor is it by accident that it is in his theological aesthetics that Balthasar makes this point. One of the special functions of the beautiful, in his view, is to make us aware that in knowing we receive more than we project. Reality is more fundamentally a gift to us than it is a construction by us. How could we be amazed by being in its beauty if what we call knowledge of the world tells us more about us than it does about it – more about ourselves than about the world in all its variegated splendour?

We exist, then (we may safely conclude), in relation to a world of things which by their presence make themselves known to us. The human mind lies open not just to a series of finitudes but also to the infinite unlimitedness of being (in the singular) thus made known in beings (in the plural). Through our awareness of finitude – our own finitude, and the finitude of the realities around us, we are also aware by that very token that, while all things are limited, being is not. In calling something finite, we are implicitly placing it in the context of the infinite. That is a further nuance it is important to note about this 'being' business. Indeed, Balthasar calls such awareness of finitude in the face of unlimited being: 'the source of all the religious and philosophical thought of humanity'¹⁰.

The transcendentals themselves

So far we have identified Balthasar's approach to epistemology and ontology in its most basic tenor. Now we must take a further step and look rather more closely at the transcendentals themselves. Every existing thing, sheerly by virtue of its existence, shares in being and in the so-called 'transcendental' qualities of being: unity, truth, goodness and beauty – so called because (as already intimated) these qualities occur in different ways and to different degrees in many kinds of things, thus 'transcending'

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the normal categories by which we divide up the world. Or, in Balthasar's own words in 'Résumé':

*The One, the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, these are what we call the transcendental attributes of Being, because they surpass all the limits of essences and are co-extensive with Being.*¹¹

Since they characterise all being, they should be considered as belonging together in an inseparable mutual co-inherence. To cite Balthasar's 'Résumé' again:

*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.*¹²

And he goes on to explain that this is – to a degree – verified in our own experience:

*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.*¹³

Contact, then, with concrete essences in their existence generates an experience of the transcendentals. This is hardly surprising. Owing to their commonality, the transcendentals set up networks of connexion between the objects that participate in them. 'To exist' means to belong to the transcendental network of being and thus to be related to all other things. Indeed, it could be said that if being, with its transcendental determinations, were *not* shared by all things, then philosophically speaking every object would be absolutely distinct from every other, and we would not live in a *world* – a common universe – at all.

For Balthasar, following in this a long tradition in Thomistic thought, the transcendentals constitute a bridge between the Source of all Being, God, and the finite existents that compose the creation. They are, so to speak, living bonds between God and the world.

Since the transcendental properties of being are supracategorical, they must be, Balthasar argues, predicable to both divine and worldly being.¹⁴

At the same time, following the cue of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), and an old Jesuit mentor, Erich Przywara: though the transcendentals of created being serve as analogues for divine Being, the difference between created being and uncreated Being is always greater than any similarity.¹⁵ This, however, does not prevent Balthasar from writing in his essay 'Revelation and the Beautiful':

Created being would not be an image and, in Thomas's expression, 'outflow' of the sovereign and living God if its transcendentals were static properties, clear and evident to our view, or if, despite their immanence in all contingent beings, they did not have something of the freedom and mysterious depths of God's decision to reveal himself.¹⁶

This rather riddling passage – about how the transcendentals are not 'static' but in some way have something about them of God's own freedom – hints at two further facets of Balthasar's teaching on the transcendental determinations of being.¹⁷ First, the transcendentals somehow point us to the dynamic life going on for ever within God. It seems likely that Balthasar has in mind here the notion that the transcendentals are joined in continuous reciprocal interpenetration – the good, the beautiful, and the true inhering in each other in unity. Given Balthasar's overall theological vision, I do not think it excessive to consider that shim-

mering interplay a shadow of the eternal interchange in the Holy Trinity. For in the triune Creator, the Persons exist through the mutually related way they possess the divine essence in their relations with each other. Or, as Balthasar himself puts it, there must be, in this interpenetration of the transcendentals:

*some analogy with the divine Being, from whom
all created beings originate and who, we surmise,
is the supreme reality that pervades all finitudes.*¹⁸

And secondly, in that somewhat enigmatic passage from ‘Revelation and the Beautiful’, there is also the suggestion of a relation between the transcendentals and divine revelation. That creatures, and notably human creatures, participate in the transcendentals in only a partial, fragmentary way, despite the human openness to the infinitude of being, implies something of the unfinished nature of creation. Only with the further self-gift of God in revelation in history – supreme evidence of the divine freedom – will the openness to the infinite the human creature possesses find its fulfilment. Writing specifically of beauty, Balthasar declares:

*An apparent enthusiasm for the beautiful is mere
idle talk when divorced from the sense of a
divine summons to change one’s life.*¹⁹

The transcendentals, so Balthasar will maintain, serve as the structure that is needed if man is to perceive and respond to that divine revelation – itself Cross-and-Resurrection-centred – which brings creation to completion. There is a ‘sphere of openness’, he writes, where our created being can be drawn into communion with God’s uncreated being, and this

*sphere of openness contains, hidden and
unfinished, the goods of salvation: peace in
God, beatitude and transfiguration, victory*

*over sin, paradise present though concealed,
all that the beautiful consoles us with ...*

Through the transcendentals we can have a foretaste or anticipation of a fulfilment that is itself 'wholly other' since it consists in the self-gift to creatures of God himself.²⁰ By the end of this short book, I hope readers will have a reasonable grasp of how that is so.

What Balthasar wanted, then, was a philosophy, and ultimately a theology, that started from the analogy of being (the limited but real comparison we can make between created being and its Uncreated font or source). He did not, however, as sometimes in Neo-Thomism, understand this as abstract being, 'common being', being as we think of it by abstraction from its supreme qualities, a theme which recurs in Transcendental Thomism albeit in a very different manner. Instead, he would begin from an analogy of being *as being is encountered concretely in the transcendentals*.

A first conclusion

Balthasar tends to criticise contemporary theology, whether conservative or more innovatory, for failing to view creation and revelation sufficiently holistically. The form taken by creation and revelation can only be grasped when creation and revelation are viewed as they were designed to be viewed: not as fragments but as a symphonic whole. *Die Wahrheit ist symphonisch*, 'truth is symphonic', is one of Balthasar's favourite expressions.²¹ This is pertinent to the transcendentals, just as they, the transcendentals, are extremely pertinent to it, to Balthasar's maxim. It is the human capacity for perceiving the whole that grants us the possibility of experiencing being in its inherently beautiful truth and goodness. How that works out, in the service of an account of the triune God, Creator and Redeemer, revealed in Jesus Christ, will become more apparent in the trio of essays that follow.

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- ¹ *The Glory of the Lord. A Theological Aesthetic* (San Francisco, Ignatius, 1982–1991); *Theo-drama. Theological Dramatic Theory* (San Francisco, Ignatius, 1988–1998); *Theo-logic. Theological Logical Theory* (San Francisco, Ignatius, 2000–2005). One should also mention here his *Epilogue* to the trilogy (San Francisco, Ignatius, 2004). The present ‘key’ is not a stage-by-stage commentary, for which see my own little trilogy: *The Word has been Abroad. A Guide through Balthasar’s Aesthetics* (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1998); *No Bloodless Myth. A Guide through Balthasar’s Dramatics* (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 2000), and *Say it is Pentecost. A Guide through Balthasar’s Logic* (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 2001). This little book is more impressionistic, as well as containing some responses to the more frequently lodged objections to Balthasar’s work.
- ² ‘Transcendentality and Gestalt’, *Communio* 11 (1984), pp. 29–39, and here at p. 34. All books and articles cited are by Balthasar unless otherwise indicated.
- ³ To avoid possible confusion, it should be noted that, as a result of the influence of Kant, the word ‘transcendental’ has undergone a sea-change in much modern philosophy. In Kantian circles, ‘transcendental philosophy’ means that philosophical method which would establish the conditions of possibility for subjective experience. More widely, in philosophical schools not especially interested in the medieval achievement, ‘transcendental’ may denote the question of the foundation of thought, i.e. the search for that which an intellectual affirmation of reality cannot do without.
- ⁴ ‘A Résumé of my Thought’, *Communio* 15 (1988), pp. 468–473, and here at pp. 470–471. If we think that is a rather hasty progression of thought, we may be reassured to learn that, beginning from the same starting-point, a ‘sua-sion’ or quasi-argument for the existence of God has been worked out in a more step-by-step manner by the American Jesuit John Michael McDermott, whose early work was on the French Jesuit interpreter of St Thomas, Pierre Rousselot – also admired by Balthasar. See J. M. McDermott, ‘Faith, Reason and Freedom’, *Irish Theological Quarterly* 67 (2002), pp. 307–332.
- ⁵ R. A. te Velde, *Participation and Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden, Brill, 1995), p. 34.
- ⁶ ‘Revelation and the Beautiful’, in *Explorations in Theology I. The Word made Flesh* (San Francisco, Ignatius, 1989), pp. 95–126 and here at p. 107. The German original antedates *Herrlichkeit*, being published as early as 1959. The theological aesthetics began to come out in the original German in 1961.
- ⁷ T. Schumacher, *Perichorein. Zur Konvergenz von Pneumatologik und Christologik in Hans Urs von Balthasars theodramatischen Entwurf einer Theologik* (Munich, Institut zur Förderung der Glaubenslehre, 2007), p. 16.
- ⁸ *The Glory of the Lord. A Theological Aesthetics I. Seeing the Form* (San Francisco, Ignatius, 1982), p. 467.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 464.
- ¹⁰ ‘A Résumé of my Thought’, art. cit., p. 469.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 471.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 471–472.

- ¹³ Ibid., p. 472.
- ¹⁴ S. van Erp, *The Art of Theology. Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics and the Foundations of Theology* (Leuven, Peeters, 2004), p. 106.
- ¹⁵ See E. T. Oakes, S. J., 'Erich Przywara and the Analogy of Being', in idem., *Pattern of Redemption. The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York, Continuum, 1994), pp. 15–44. Father Oakes' book is a very sophisticated and elegant, as well as scholarly and thoughtful, study and can be unreservedly recommended to the reader.
- ¹⁶ 'Revelation and the Beautiful', art. cit., p. 111.
- ¹⁷ Balthasar does not simply, then, *reproduce* Thomasian – or any other high mediaeval – thinking on the *transcendentia* (later, *transcendentalia*). See M. Lochbrunner, 'Hans Urs von Balthasars Trilogie der Liebe', *Forum katholische Theologie* 11 (1995), pp. 161–181, and especially p. 174.
- ¹⁸ 'Earthly Beauty and Divine Glory', *Communio* 10 (1983), pp. 202–206, and here at p. 202.
- ¹⁹ 'Revelation and the Beautiful', art. cit., p. 107.
- ²⁰ Ibid., pp. 111–112.
- ²¹ Giving its title to a work translated as *Truth is Symphonic. Aspects of Christian Pluralism* (San Francisco, Ignatius, 1987), in which see especially pp. 7–9.