

## INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

The purpose of this book, *On Being*, across four volumes on Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and Martin Heidegger is to give readers a thorough yet relatively concise and accessible scholarly introduction to what is known in philosophy as “the Question of Being.” Being is, says the Eleatic Stranger in Plato’s *Sophist*, of all the Forms, “the greatest and most important expression.”<sup>1</sup> As great as it is, it also happens to be the most difficult to grasp, and the cause of endless debate. Yet, according to Plato’s *Sophist*, it

---

1. Plato, *Sophist* 243d, trans. Nicholas P. White (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1993), 33. Though this is a good translation, and makes the point with which I wish to introduce this book, it should be noted that this comment could also be translated as “the greatest and foremost chief of them” (Plato, *Sophist* 243d, trans. Harold North Fowler [1921; repr., London: Harvard University Press, 2006), 360–61), or as “the greatest and first (πρώτου) principle/origin (ἀρχηγού)” (my translation).

is Being which is most coveted by the true philosopher.<sup>2</sup> Josef Pieper suggests that one of the essential elements of Platonic philosophy is that “the philosophizing person, insofar as he philosophizes, is on the hunt for ‘the Idea of Being.’”<sup>3</sup> He says in a different article in the same collection, “And it is this same totality of Being that is the object of philosophizing; indeed, with philosophizing, nothing more is meant than the contemplation of reality *as a whole*.”<sup>4</sup> The question of Being, then, is that one question that all true philosophers seek to answer; but, can it be answered? More importantly, when the purpose of a treatise is to contribute to the sum of human knowledge, is it possible, today, to really say something that hasn’t already been said about Being?

Étienne Gilson introduces his book, *Constantes Philosophique de l’Être*, with the following comment concerning the nature of the science of Being *qua* Being, and the temptation of the metaphysician:

The metaphysician never really has the impression of actually discovering something new; rather, he gets the impression that the truth which he has discovered, as everyone must re-discover it for themselves, has always been there, before everyone’s eyes, and that even those who

---

2. Plato, *Sophist* 254a.

3. Josef Pieper, “On the Platonic Idea of Philosophy,” in *For the Love of Wisdom: Essays on the Nature of Philosophy*, trans. Roger Wasserman, ed. Berthold Wald (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2006), 162.

4. Josef Pieper, “A Plea for Philosophy,” in *For the Love of Wisdom*, 119.

misunderstood it, or sometimes denied it, have always, in spite of this fact, used it. It must have been this way, as all the truth that we call science comes from that knowledge which is obtained from the principles. Metaphysicians, themselves, always knew this and more than one has envied, every once in a while, the joy of the scientist (scholar) who, in any domain, never ceases to learn more about his object, instead of the progress of the metaphysician which consists in recognizing that these principles, towards which, from the sciences, he moves, bury themselves progressively, to his eyes, in some sort of fog as if, contrary to what happens in the natural sciences, a sort of non-knowing, or non-science, was, in Metaphysics, the summit of knowledge. Research on the principle casts an envious look towards that research that is pursued from the principle.<sup>5</sup>

The principle of which Gilson speaks is Being. For ancient and medieval philosophers and theologians, Being is the principle of all knowledge—knowledge begins in Being and beings. Yet, says Gilson, there is no such thing as metaphysical progress; or, at best, the notion of progress, as seen in the natural sciences and in most university research, is meaningless when applied to the question of Being. The metaphysician, therefore, will always be somewhat of an oddity in the world of academia, for to “get

---

5. Étienne Gilson, *Constantes Philosophiques de l'Être* (Paris: VRIN, 1983), 12 (hereafter *CPE*). Our translation.

ahead” in academia is to discover something new and to add to knowledge. Yet, if what Gilson says is true, then, necessarily, the actual results of our research may seem negligible when compared to the discoveries of the natural sciences, or, what Gilson calls all sciences other than metaphysics, “research that is pursued from the principle.”

Does this mean that our research is pointless, a waste of time and money? The greatest philosophers that this world has ever known, four of whom we will be considering in this series, would say that, in a certain sense, the attempt to answer the question of Being just is “useless.”<sup>6</sup> As Pieper says, “Indeed, it is true: philosophy does not serve any purpose—not only as a matter of fact, but because it cannot and must not serve any purpose! In the words of Martin Heidegger: ‘It is entirely proper and perfectly as it should be: philosophy is of no use.’”<sup>7</sup> Or, as Pieper says elsewhere, referring directly to the question of Being, “Anyone who asked that question without warning in the company of people whose minds hinge on necessities and material success would most likely be regarded as crazy.”<sup>8</sup>

---

6. Joseph Owens points out that in the Aristotelian tradition, “metaphysics is of no use at all. It is above all use. It is an end and not a means. It is to be pursued for its own sake, and not for any utility that it may bring to the other interests of human life.” Joseph Owens, *St. Thomas and the Future of Metaphysics* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1957), 21.

7. Josef Pieper, *In Defense of Philosophy: Classical Wisdom Stands Up to Modern Challenges*, trans. Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 41.

8. Josef Pieper, “The Philosophical Act,” in *Leisure: The Basis of Culture and the Philosophical Act*, trans. Alexander Dru (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 80.

Was not Thales laughed at, and ridiculed, by the young woman?

Pieper echoes the very same sentiment about the progress of metaphysics, as is expressed by Gilson, when he says,

Whoever considers the basic question concerning the structure of Being in general (“what does it mean to be something real?”) will certainly experience a progressive illuminating of reality, in keeping with the depth of his commitment to conceptual clarification and the impartiality with which he opens himself to reality and allows himself to be affected by it; and he will naturally be interested in doing precisely this. Nevertheless, it would actually be wrong to assert that the philosophizing person in this way comes face to face with something absolutely not yet known, never before thought, something new and unknown. On the contrary, what occurs is more akin to the growing distinctness of something already, albeit obscurely, known, the taking possession of something that has almost been lost, precisely that kind of retrieval of what has been forgotten we call memory.<sup>9</sup>

So, our approach to the question of Being, according to Pieper, is less like discovering something that is new and as yet unknown, and more like remembering something that we have almost already forgotten. It is something that we

---

9. Pieper, “Plea for Philosophy,” 135.

are in contact with in our everyday world, but always seems to be just out of reach. Pieper continues his thoughts on philosophical progress, a couple of paragraphs later, with the comment,

How do we measure progress in philosophy? Does such a thing exist at all?... “Progress” is in fact a problematic category in the philosophical realm if what is meant by progress is a steady enrichment of our collective knowledge that increases *eo ipso* in a manner commensurate with the passage of time...Philosophical progress certainly exists, but not so much across generations as in the inner life experience of the philosophizing person—and that in the same proportion in which he, silent and attentive, catches sight of the depth and breadth of his at once new and primeval object.<sup>10</sup>

If we cannot hope for progress, at least in the scientific sense of the term, then what are we doing in this approach to the question of Being? Perhaps we can gain some insight, in order to respond to this question, by returning to Gilson’s short article on the knowledge of the principle. He notes, concerning metaphysical debate, “Nothing, here, allows a metaphysician to respond for other metaphysicians, for in a domain where dialectical demonstration loses its rights, one can do no more than look, say what he sees, and invite others to turn, like him-

---

10. Pieper, “Plea for Philosophy,” 136.

self, their eyes towards the truth.”<sup>11</sup> In fact, says Gilson, earlier in this same article, “Take two metaphysicians who are equally competent and in possession of equal ability in the handling of dialectical arguments, it is possible that neither of them will ever succeed in convincing the other, because they do not see the same things.”<sup>12</sup> Is this not the state of the philosopher, as he is described in the *Sophist*, who is hard to see “because that area is so bright and the eyes of most people’s souls cannot bear to look at that which is divine”?<sup>13</sup> If the philosopher is difficult to see because of that which he is pursuing then that which he is pursuing must be even more difficult to grasp. As Pieper puts it, in the article that we quoted above, “The philosophizing person finds himself in just such a situation; this is precisely what singles him out, that is, that he is obliged to speak of something undeniably encountered but that cannot be expressed exactly in words.”<sup>14</sup> One wonders if this means that we can never err in such a philosophical quest. This, the possibility of error, will depend upon the nature of what we are pursuing and our ability to grasp and articulate it.

In the light of such comments concerning the nature of the philosopher, and the difficulty of accurately expressing what the philosopher is able to learn about Being, it seems entirely likely that this book may end up being much ado about nothing. Is the attempt to answer the

---

11. Gilson, *CPE*, 43.

12. Gilson, *CPE*, 22–23.

13. Plato, *Sophist* 254a.

14. Pieper, “Plea for Philosophy,” 139–40.

question of Being, therefore, in light of its difficulty and relative uselessness, a quest not worth pursuing? Interestingly enough, those very same philosophers whose works have, without any exaggeration, molded the minds of the great men and women around the world (and not just the Western world, as many are wont to say), also attempted to answer the question of Being. Perhaps we can learn something from them?

Stanley Rosen, in his book *The Question of Being*, states that, “If philosophy is the pursuit of truth, and our purpose is to explain the world, or Being, then our explanations must in fact be true. If they are true, then we must believe them, and if we believe them, then they must govern our lives, whether we like it or not.”<sup>15</sup> The question of Being<sup>16</sup> is a question that has plagued the history of philosophy.<sup>17</sup> The question of Being is always in the background of every philosophical (not to mention theological and scientific) discussion, yet if it is left in the background it will come back to haunt the theories of even the most analyt-

---

15. Stanley Rosen, *The Question of Being: A Reversal of Heidegger* (1993; repr., South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2002), 120.

16. Throughout this text I will use a lowercase *b* with the word ‘being’ when I am referring to a being or beings, and an uppercase *B* with ‘Being’ when I am referring to Being in abstraction from any one being or collection of beings. When I insert a hyphen, Be-ing, I am referring to the act of Being (Being used as a verb).

17. We have not explained what we mean by the question of Being at this point, as we wish to discover, for Plato, Aristotle, and Martin Heidegger, just what they mean when they ask the question of Being. We will only make a decision about what we mean by the question of Being once we have been able to interact with these philosophers’ work on Being.

ical of philosophers.<sup>18</sup> It seems that one cannot even consider ethical or political problems without at least paying homage to the question of Being. Those who do not often run into problems in the long run. The greatest thinkers that humanity has ever known are, without a doubt, those who have wrestled with this question. Yet many modern and contemporary philosophers do not even mention this question in passing.<sup>19</sup> It could be said that, from the end

---

18. Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Introduction à la Métaphysique*, trans. Gilbert Kahn (France: Éditions Gallimard, 1967), 147, 150, 207–8.

19. For example, a rapid survey of some of the best handbooks, introductions, and advanced textbooks on metaphysics reveal that they do not even consider the question of Being as Be-ing, but, rather, spend more time considering the properties of beings, relations between beings, possibility and necessity, types of beings, and other aspects of beings. D. M. Armstrong, the noted Australian metaphysician, discusses properties, relations, states of affairs, particulars, time, mind, etc., but *Being* does not seem to make it into even the basic outline of his work, let alone his metaphysical reflections. If the reader pays careful attention, he will find the skeletons of what could become a doctrine of being; it is not, however, developed. D. M. Armstrong, *Sketch for a Systematic Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Peter van Inwagen, noted professor of philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, though he talks a lot about beings in his introductions to metaphysics, does not discuss the problem of Being except in an appendix at the end of his book. The great majority of the book is focused on the types of things that are, on giving a rational explanation of why things exist, and on a consideration of rational beings. Peter van Inwagen, *Metaphysics*, 3rd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2009). The book *Contemporary Debates in Metaphysics* considers the same basic issues as Armstrong's book, with little to no thought about the problem of Being. Theodore Sider, John Hawthorne and Dean W. Zimmerman, eds., *Contemporary Debates in Metaphysics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008). This basic trend, that of giving little to no attention to the problem that the notion of Being causes for any

of the medieval age to the time of Heidegger, the question of Being was, by many great philosophers, largely ignored and even rejected as a waste of time and an empty concept. All of a sudden Heidegger burst onto the philosophical scene, with the publication of his book *Sein und Zeit*,<sup>20</sup> and put the question of Being back on the philosophical menu. Heidegger notes, in the very first sentence of this great book, that “This question has today been forgotten.”<sup>21</sup> It almost seemed as if Heidegger would, in his own cryptic way, resurrect interest in the question of Being. Yet arguably only a few philosophers followed Heidegger in his questioning of Being. Heidegger even appears to suggest that one of his greatest students (J.P. Sartre) had misunderstood his project, and taken it in a wrong direction.

In this series of books, we propose to take a fresh look at the question of Being by comparing the approaches of

---

consideration of beings, can also be found in a number of other books on metaphysics, including Loux’s introduction and contemporary reader. Michael J. Loux, *Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006); Michael J. Loux, ed., *Metaphysics: Contemporary Readings* (New York: Routledge, 2001). These books deal more with beings than with what it means to be, and with the inherent problems in actually talking about Being, non-being, and becoming. It might be said that many of the problems that are considered in these books are discussed as necessary corollaries to the question of Being; however, this could only be the case if we assume a specific answer to the question of Being.

20. Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Neunzehnte Auflage (Tubingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2006); Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008) (hereafter *BT*).

21. Heidegger, *BT*, 21 [2]. Cf. Heidegger, *Introduction à la Métaphysique*, 51, 61, 74, 92, 138, 205–6.

Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and Martin Heidegger. Heidegger did most of his greatest thinking at the edge of the *Schwarzwald*, at the base of the mountains near Frieburg, Germany. Our books, in light of what we have already said, could be likened to the attempt to climb a mountain that is enveloped in clouds. Like Moses, who, summoned by the One who calls himself the “I am that I am,” climbed Mount Sinai and, thus, entered into the presence of the God of the Israelites, we propose to attempt a trek up the mount of Being. Will we catch a glimpse of Being? That remains to be seen.

From the foot of the mountain, approaching the question of Being looks like an enormous challenge. Others have attempted to climb this mountain with little or no success, many stand at the bottom quibbling about how to start, and most, tired of the endless debate about Being, have left this question unanswered and gone off to explore other avenues. This series, however, stands before important trails that are rumored to lead to the top. From the foot of the mountain it is impossible to see if all of these trails do indeed lead to the top, if none of them do, or if any of them do. Furthermore, even if all of them lead to the top, it seems plausible that one of them may be better than the others. The only way to learn if they lead to the top, to learn the advantages and disadvantages of each trail, and to wisely decide whether it is better to follow one of them or to create one’s own trail, is to actually travel each path. Only then can we truly compare and contrast each trail and give advice concerning which one to follow, whether we need to start over, or whether we should follow one of the trails to a certain point and then branch off. We will, therefore, as with Dante’s Virgil in *The Divine*

*Comedy* or C.S. Lewis's George MacDonald in *The Great Divorce*, take Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, and Heidegger as our guides, and venture up the mountain. We don't claim to have any special insights, not this early in the journey, but, we will follow each path to its end, and when we have surveyed each path, we will then be better able to postulate about the best route up the mountain.

Many who have already attempted this trek remind us of the difficulty of describing, precisely, what we will see. As such, it seems best to follow, as closely as possible, our four guides. Each of the books in this series may be divided into two major sections. The first major section of each book could be portrayed as a projection of interpretation. I will attempt to establish, as accurately as possible, the differing attempts to answer the question of Being that were proposed by Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, and Heidegger. I will, in a sense, be attempting to map out the paths they took in their quest to attain the summit. Each of these sections contain my own contributions to what I propose as the proper interpretation of these philosophers. These contributions take into account a preliminary interpretation of these authors, accompanied by an attempt to wade through a veritable swamp of interpretative writings that purport to tell us, once and for all, how to properly understand the ontological claims of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, and Heidegger. My contributions to philosophical thought surrounding these particular thinkers do not constitute, however, the primary goal of this series. Rather, they will serve to help us in our attempt to climb the mountain of Being.

In the second section, of each book, I will interact critically with each of these metaphysicians. This second

section should be seen as a philosophical section: the active pursuit of wisdom. It is my hope that this series on the Question of Being will provide guidance about how to interact with this perennial question, through a comparison, analysis, and critique of the thinkers we are considering.

Gilson's comment, near the end of the article quoted above, illustrates, quite well, what we hope to do in this series. He says,

“The music of Beethoven really is his own, and this is why it interests us, but that which should interest us is not to know whether this is the *World* of Descartes, it is to know whether the world of Descartes is also the true [world]. We will resign ourselves, therefore, to not philosophize as an artist, in the manner of the idealist, and we will admit that it is perhaps even the case, progress in metaphysical intuition being rare, that to philosophize consists, for each person that does it, in modestly walking in the footprints of those philosophers who preceded him, or, rather, to rediscover for himself the path that those who went before him followed, and, in this way, taking up again [refaisant], for his own sake, apprenticeship in the same truth.”<sup>22</sup>

Here, we should make a note about our interpretative approach to the works of these three philosophers. There is always a danger, in approaching the writings of a great thinker, of having one's own understanding and in-

---

22. Gilson, *CPE*, 50–51. Our translation.

terpretation of those writings tainted by what others have already said about them. One's interpretation may also be tainted by one's upbringing, the way that one has reacted to life's circumstances, etc.<sup>23</sup> This is why Gregory of Nazianzus says, in a sermon on theology, that in order to do theology one must not only have knowledge but also be pious.<sup>24</sup> That is, one's actions, reactions, and character have an effect on one's approach to philosophy—an effect not easily undone. The idea that one's character affects one's approach to philosophy would have been considered, prior to Heidegger and since Descartes, absolutely ridiculous. Today, however, and perhaps because of Heidegger's emphasis on lived human experience, such a notion may be more accepted amongst the members of academia.

It is, perhaps, absolutely impossible to escape all outside influences on our understanding and reading of these thinkers. I have, after all, had a number of years of formal training in the Thomistic approach to philosophy and the history of philosophy, and much of my personal research has focused on Thomistic metaphysics and natural theology (by studying Aquinas's own writings, and by reading the works of some of the important neo-Thomists such as Étienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain, Josef Pieper, Thomas

---

23. This is, in fact, one of Heidegger's key lessons in relation to Being.

24. Gregory of Nazianzus, *The Second Theological Oration, Oration 28, On the Doctrine of God*, in *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and two Letters to Cledonius*, trans. Lionel Wickham and Frederick Williams (Crestwood, NY : St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 37-39. Grégoire de Nazianze, "Sermon XXXIV: Sur la théologie," in *Sermons de Saint Grégoire de Nazianze* (Paris: André Pralard, MDCXCIII), 2 :129–30.

Joseph White, Brian Davies, John Wippel, Joseph Owen, Frederick Copleston, etc.). That being said, I have done my very best to approach and interpret all of these philosophers so as to let them speak for themselves, and not to interpret them through the lenses of other thinkers that I have already studied in great depth. It should be noted that this entire series is, when one considers the key claims of Heidegger's approach to Being, an experiment—something of a new attempt to ask the question of Being. It remains to be seen how my interactions with these very different approaches (one might say very different traditions) concerning the question of Being will affect our final proposals concerning future discussions of the question of Being.

I have attempted, as much as possible, to allow our four metaphysicians to speak for themselves, bringing other authors into discussion with them only when necessary to clear up a difficulty. It might be said that, in working through the thoughts of these great authors, we have followed the advice that Heidegger gave to a student who would be studying Schleiermacher for her dissertation: “first read Schleiermacher himself... At first, all the secondary literature should be avoided... Only toward the end should she concern herself with the ‘literature.’”<sup>25</sup> Though we did not learn this approach to the interpretation of a text directly from Heidegger, this is how we approached the texts of the metaphysicians in question.

As to the order of the sections on Plato and Aristotle, though I began my research by reading and interpreting

---

25. Theodore Kisiel, *The Genesis of Heidegger's Being and Time* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 72.

Plato and Aristotle, and then turned to their contemporary interpreters, I have inverted the reading order of these sections so that the reader could better compare our understanding of these scholars with their contemporary interpreters. As such, I begin by analyzing a number of important contemporary interpretations of Plato and Aristotle. I then provide my own thoughts concerning Plato and Aristotle. This is followed, in each section, by an analysis, based upon my considered interpretation of their doctrines of Being, of these major thinkers' approach to the question of Being. In this way I have been able to avoid, somewhat successfully, being influenced (negatively or positively) in my interpretations of these great thinkers by other interpreters and philosophers. One can never be entirely uninfluenced in one's approach to any thinker, but I have made a conscious effort (facilitated by the approach that we mention above) to interpret each of these authors such that they are being allowed to talk for themselves. My success will have to be measured by those who know these authors best, and I submit my interpretations for correction by those who, better than I, know the thought of these great thinkers.