

Philosophy and Its History: An Analysis of Gilson's Historical Method and Treatment of Neoplatonism

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I.

In his Preface to *God and Philosophy*, Étienne Gilson claims that a historical approach to philosophy uses the history of philosophy (or rather, the history of past philosophies) as a handmaid to philosophy. Gilson, however, remains explicitly aware that such a historical-philosophical approach may “deteriorate into a mere dialectical game wherein philosophical dogmas are debased into philosophical opinions, each of which is successively shown as true from its own point of view and as false from the viewpoint of any other one.”¹ Aware of the dangers of employing history to the aid of philosophy, Gilson sets out in *Being and Some Philosophers* to do philosophy; he is adamant that *Being and Some Philosophers* “is not a book in the history of philosophy,” and even admits that, as a history, it would be entirely wrong given the apparent historical arbitrariness of the philosophers considered.²

Gilson offers a historically-based defense of Thomistic metaphysics in *Being and Some Philosophers*. Throughout his analysis he provides critiques of alternative metaphysical positions which have occupied places of prominence throughout the history of philosophy; he situates metaphysics of *esse* within a historical context and puts it into dialogue with rival metaphysical conceptions. The historical context constructed, however, is neither entirely chronological nor exhaustive; he selects major representatives from a given metaphysical tradition to demonstrate the way in which the fact of existence has been repeatedly overlooked. As already stated, Gilson is clear that he is not presenting a historical account of philosophy, but rather a philosophic argument. Thus, Gilson treats the “existential neutrality” of Platonic metaphysics in Chapter One by examining Plato, Plotinus, Dionysius the Areopagite, and John Scottus Eriugena. Chapter Two

1 *God and Philosophy*, xx.

2 *Being and Some Philosophers*, ix–x.

takes up Aristotelian substantialism, tracing the tradition through Averroes and Siger of Brabant. In Chapter Three, Gilson examines the essentialism of Avicenna, Duns Scotus, and Suárez, and in Chapter Four he takes up the moderns (Descartes, Hume, Kant, Hegel, and Kierkegaard). Finally, Chapters Five and Six turn back to the thirteenth century for Thomas's complete metaphysical interpretation of being.

Gilson, in the Preface, clearly draws attention to the difference between the task of history and that of philosophy: while the task of history is to understand and make understood, philosophy must choose, "and applying to history for reasons to make a choice is no longer history, it is philosophy."³ While Gilson clearly understands history to be the servant of philosophy, Wayne J. Hankey claims that both history and philosophy remain, for Gilson, *ancillae theologiae*. Thus, if history is in the service of philosophy, it is by extension the servant of theology as well. Regarding Gilson's historical method, Hankey says: "History is used to create dialectical experiments leading toward, if never producing, his Thomistic metaphysics of *esse* derived from Exodus 3:14."⁴ Criticisms that prove fatal to Gilson's position fall into roughly three different categories, though in many ways they remain related. The first type of criticism focuses precisely on this interpretation of Exodus 3:14 as the revelation of a metaphysical truth. The strongest objection against Gilson's interpretation of the history of philosophy is that Gilson in the end must persuade his readers that all of philosophy before Aquinas had not only misunderstood the act of existence, but also the fact of revelation, and so missed the philosophy that accompanied this revelation. Further, he also must maintain that the tradition since Thomas has almost totally distorted him.⁵ As will become evident, while Gilson hopes to use a selected history of philosophic thinkers to defend a metaphysical thesis, it is the self-revelation of God—"I AM"—that furnishes the ground in which metaphysics is rooted. T. F. O'Meara, says Hankey, has claimed that Gilson—besides being uninformed about and excessively critical of modern philosophy—fashioned an eccentric theological context for metaphysics and "thought that insights on being were derived from the revelation on Sinai."⁶ Exodus guaranteed Thomas's metaphysics of *esse* for Gilson: insofar as God revealed the metaphysical truth, *I am*, Gilson found in Thomism an "existentialism" free from the vicissitudes of history. While other philosophies had their origin in man's natural tendency to err in recognizing being, Gilson's metaphysics is founded on the eternal rock of God's self-revelation: "Nothing philosophy or empirical science could discover could touch it. It was both metaphysical and revealed."⁷

A second line of criticism against Gilson argues that Gilson's "existential" Thomism failed to recognize and perceive the Proclean and Pseudo-Dionysian side of Thomas's thought. Recent developments seeking

3 *Being and Some Philosophers*, x.

4 "From Metaphysics to History," 158.

5 *Ibid.*, 163.

6 *Ibid.*, 176.

7 *Ibid.*, 187.

to uncover Thomas's Neoplatonism strongly oppose Gilson's thesis.⁸ Fran O'Rourke, for example, argues that *esse* determines the ontological density of each individual along the great Chain of Being, drawing attention to the Dionysian origin of the term *virtus essendi* in Aquinas. According to O'Rourke, Gilson identifies *virtus essendi* with the *actus essendi* that each thing receives through its form, but incorrectly denies that it can be present in varying degrees of intensity.⁹ In *Being and Some Philosophers*, Gilson's treatment of the Christian Neoplatonic authors, Pseudo-Dionysius and Eriugena—besides being extremely short in comparison to other analyses—seems to indicate that he does not fully recognize the Neoplatonic elements that play a role in Aquinas's own ontology.

The trend of contemporary philosophy of religion that takes seriously Heidegger's critique of onto-theology gives rise to a third objection to Gilson's metaphysics of *esse*.

The aim of Gilson's historical work, Hankey says, was metaphysical; however, "history serving metaphysics is distorted by lifting weights beyond its strength."¹⁰ Hankey quotes Jean-Luc Marion as a representative figure in Christian postmodernism, who has claimed that Gilson chose to "deny the 'end of metaphysics' by a deforming reconstruction of Thomas 'against the unanimous tradition that claims him as its own.'"¹¹ The post-modern movement in philosophy of religion that attempts to articulate a post-metaphysical theology—exemplified by Marion—is a vibrant project taking much of its inspiration from none other than Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite.¹² Gilson's presentation of the Neoplatonic tradition, including Pseudo-Dionysius, proves deserving of attention, insofar as the question remains whether or not Gilson's Thomism can converse meaningfully with these contemporary post-metaphysical positions. For now, the three objections outlined can be summarized as follows: (1) Gilson's metaphysical thesis is not proven by way of historical or philosophical analysis, but is rather secured by God's self-revelation as "I am" in Exodus 3:14; (2) Gilson's understanding of being does not fully penetrate the Neoplatonic elements in Aquinas's thought, and thus too quickly rejects Christian Neoplatonism as a viable, meaningful way of conceiving being and non-being, as well as approaching the divine; (3) Gilson's position is rigidly dogmatic, and ill-equipped to respond to philosophy after the "end of metaphysics."

II.

An examination of Gilson's treatment of Christian Neoplatonism will shed light on his historical approach in *Being and Some Philosophers* insofar as Neoplatonic thought attributed much philosophical weight to *non-being*; Gilson's thesis rests upon the proper understanding of *being*, and thus will

8 Ibid., 167, 182.

9 "Virtus Essendi: Intensive Being"; cf. Gilson, "Virtus Essendi." For a complete account of Dionysian elements in Aquinas, see O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and Aquinas*.

10 "From Metaphysics to History," 163.

11 Ibid.; cf. Jean-Luc Marion, "Metaphysics and Phenomenology," 578n10. Marion develops his post-metaphysical theology in *God Without Being*.

12 On this theme, see Carlson, "Postmetaphysical Theology," 58, 67.

influence his interpretation of the Neoplatonic authors treated. In presenting Eriugena's thought, specifically, Gilson overlooks the complexity of *nihil* articulated in the *Periphyseon*. Working backwards, as it were, Gilson's treatment of Pseudo-Dionysius is extremely brief, and the "hyperphatic" language developed in the *Mystical Theology* is oversimplified. It is this hyperphatic mode of conceiving of the divine that informs the kind of "ontology" developed in the Neoplatonic tradition.

Gilson introduces Eriugena/John the Scot as a disciple of Dionysius, who articulates a complete cosmogony in his *Periphyseon* (*Division of Nature*) never betraying the spirit of his master. The world for Eriugena, according to Gilson, is a deduction from its first principle, each term of the deduction constituting a certain nature. The first principle is, however, *non-being*. For this reason, the cosmogony outlined by Eriugena is called *meontological*; that is, in privileging non-being as the ground of reality, he develops a kind of negative ontology. *Natura*, Gilson says, "signifies all that about which something can be said because it is included in the general order of the universe," and quotes Eriugena: "Nature is the general name of all that which is and of all that which is not."¹³ Gilson correctly recognizes the distinction Eriugena makes between natures that are and natures that are not: natures that can be grasped by intellectual knowledge *are*, and hence are beings, while other natures are either above being or below being, and hence are not. Regarding these natures that are not, Gilson says, "[i]t is not only that we cannot define them; rather they themselves are of such nature that they cannot be defined."¹⁴ Gilson proceeds to comment that Eriugena chose to write on the division of *nature*, rather than on the division of *reality*, for no other reason than that he needed a "wider name than reality" to include non-being(s). Gilson's quarrel with Eriugena lies in the fact that the first principle of reality is (a) non-being. As a Christian, Eriugena identifies this first principle with the divine, and following a Neoplatonic notion of causation, the divinity *is not* since its effects *are*: "The being of all things is the divinity which is above being."¹⁵

Gilson rejects the interpretations that accuse Eriugena of monism and pantheism; he does, however, accuse Eriugena of exactly the same mistake as that of Plotinus. In Plotinian metaphysics of the One, lower grades of reality exist only because their first principle itself is not; for Eriugena, the being of creatures is utterly incomparable to the being of God since God himself has no being. Gilson says: "Between Him Who is not and things that are, there is an unbridgeable metaphysical gap. It is not even an ontological gap of the sort, which, in other doctrines, separates the supreme Being from finite beings."¹⁶ Eriugena would have rejected the doctrine of the analogy of being, in that God and his creatures are so much distinct that we cannot even apply the name of being to God. Gilson correctly identifies Eriugena's goal: to raise God so much above created beings in

13 *Periphyseon* 1.441a, quoted in *Being and Some Philosophers*, 35.

14 *Being and Some Philosophers*, 35.

15 *Periphyseon* 1.443b, quoted in *Being and Some Philosophers*, 35.

16 *Being and Some Philosophers*, 36.

the world that he is raised even above being. For Eriugena, this avoids any possible confusion of *esse* and the possibility of pantheism. Eriugena resists the charge of pantheism in that God is not the whole of his creation, and his creation is not a part of God insofar as God is raised above being: God is not the genus of creatures, and creatures are not a species of the genus God. If Eriugena had, in fact, posited the first principle to be being, the charge of pantheism would be correct in that God would be the being of all things. Eriugena's articulation of the first principle is quite the opposite.

At this point in Gilson's presentation of Eriugena, he makes a rather curious claim. Pointing to the repeated condemnations of Eriugena's philosophical doctrine by the Church, Gilson claims that his philosophy was not condemned because it was inconsistent *qua* philosophy; rather, Eriugena was condemned because, as a *Christian* philosophy, it was simply wrong. Gilson says: "if a Christian philosopher maintains that God can be the being of creatures because He himself is not, that philosopher is wrong... The only mistake of John the Scot was to imagine that the existentially neutral philosophy of Plato suited the supremely existing Christian God."¹⁷ This argument rests on Gilson's claim that the Christian God himself revealed that he *is*. Revelation guarantees Gilson's metaphysical notion that the first principle is the supreme act of existence. His rejection of Eriugena's meontology ultimately rests on its inherent Platonic character: Eriugena's mistake—the same as that of Plotinus—was that he relied on a Platonic conception of being that was too "existentially neutral" to accommodate the Christian God who revealed himself as *He Who Is*.

Once again, Gilson says that Eriugena was condemned because, insofar as he hoped to articulate a Christian philosophy, he was simply wrong. In the concluding chapter of *Being and Some Philosophers*—"Knowledge and Existence"—Gilson argues that philosophy *qua* knowledge must rest on being.¹⁸ Thus, his claim that Eriugena's philosophy failed to meet the standards of Christian philosophy, but of itself was *not* inconsistent *qua* philosophy, remains obscure. Gilson may be equivocating on the meaning of the term "philosophy" here, and one should not take him to task on this point. In his chapter, "Knowledge and Existence," Gilson draws a distinction between philosophic "systems" and philosophic *knowledge*.¹⁹ Systems ultimately rest on assumption; in the case of Eriugena, his assumption was that the first principle is non-being. On Gilson's view, Eriugena might have been guilty of constructing a "system," ill-founded on non-being, and thus not attaining true philosophic knowledge.

Gilson does not make any serious misstep in his presentation of Eriugena; that is, there is no point in Gilson's treatment of Eriugena that is essentially incorrect. This does not mean that his analysis and philosophic objections stand immune to criticism. The first point to examine is a purely historical one, and concerns Eriugena's authorities and influences. Gilson

17 *Ibid.*

18 *Ibid.*, 213.

19 For one instance of this distinction between systematic thought and philosophy, see *Being and Some Philosophers*, 212–13.

was correct in identifying Eriugena as a follower of Pseudo-Dionysius. Given the brief presentation in *Being and Some Philosophers*, however, Gilson seems to imply that—besides being influenced by Dionysius—Eriugena was essentially a Platonist who attempted to articulate a Christian philosophy using the defective tools Platonism had to offer. Gilson completely ignores other significant figures who very much contributed to Eriugena's thought, namely, Augustine, both Gregory of Nyssa and Nazianus, as well as Maximus the Confessor (who was especially important in his remodeling and interpretation of Pseudo-Dionysius). While recent literature on Eriugena had already categorized him as a kind of synthesis between the thought of Augustine and Dionysius, Deirdre Carabine draws a considerable amount of attention to the influence that the Greek Fathers exerted on Eriugena's thought.²⁰ For example, Carabine claims that Eriugena's negative understanding of essence was very much inspired by Gregory of Nyssa.²¹ Not to place too much weight on Gilson's failing to provide a complete historical background of Eriugena's thought (since such a project concerning every thinker treated in his book would have taken up many volumes), Gilson is sure to remind his readers in his Preface that he is not writing a history of philosophy, and that as a history, the book would be entirely wrong. An apparent shortcoming, however, must be noted. As said above, Gilson places Eriugena squarely within the broad Platonic tradition. While this is not incorrect, Gilson fails to situate Eriugena within important *mediating* traditions, namely, both the Latin West and the Greek East. That is to say, Eriugena was not simply a Christian thrown into (so to speak) Platonic ontology. Eriugena's understanding and developments regarding being and non-being depended significantly on two traditions—themselves a part of one larger tradition—which attempted not only to understand the underlying structures of reality using (Neo-)Platonic conceptual tools, but struggled also to articulate a coherent theology. Having said that, the second point to examine is precisely Eriugena's conception of non-being and its role in negative theology.

Gilson was indeed correct to attribute to Eriugena the claim that the ultimate ground of reality is non-being, which in effect is identified with the divine. He does not, however, fully appreciate the richness of the *nihil* that Eriugena attempts to articulate in his *Periphyseon*. For Gilson, there is being and there is non-being: either a thing is, or is not. Gilson is unable to grasp Eriugena's non-being due to his own understanding of non-being in the privative, Augustinian sense. Throughout the *Periphyseon* there is a constant dialectical tension between being and non-being, and Carabine refers to this tension as one of the great innovative themes of the work. According to Carabine, the ultimate ground of reality for Eriugena, *nihil*, lies *beyond* both being and non-being.²² Thus, identifying the divine with the *nihil* that is beyond being and non-being reveals an entirely deeper mode of conceiving God. An explication of Eriugena's five modes of interpreta-

20 *Eriugena*, 20–22.

21 *Ibid.*, 41.

22 *Ibid.*, 38.

tion of the relationship between being and non-being is not required here; however, Carabine says that through his five modes "Eriugena clearly shows that being and non-being, while contradictory, are in a sense resolved, not only in God who is above both being and non-being and at the same time is being and non-being, but also at every level of reality..."²³ The rigid and simple distinction that Gilson draws between being and non-being clearly does not adequately grasp the meaningful dialectal tension between the two components of reality in Eriugena's thought. Understanding Eriugena's *nihil* as beyond both being and non-being is essential to grasping and appreciating the implications for his radical negative theology.

In a study that has claimed to be concerned with historical method, one might wonder how a discussion concerning negative theology might contribute to the current analysis. Gilson explicitly claims that "He Who Is"—the Judeo-Christian God—is (being); this claim is secured by the fact of God's self-revelation in Exodus. It is an affirmative statement concerning the divine, albeit an affirmation within the Thomistic framework of analogy, and with the proper distinction between the affirmation *that* God exists and knowledge of *what* God is. Pseudo-Dionysius suggests an alternate mode of theological discourse that conceives of God beyond the categorical limitations of being and non-being.

Eriugena's indebtedness to the Areopagite is obvious. In his theological system specifically, Eriugena closely follows Pseudo-Dionysius regarding the ineffability of God: while offering a positive account of the "knowability, visibility, and appearance of God," Eriugena counterbalances this positive aspect by strongly insisting "on a simultaneous unknowableness of God's being."²⁴ This balance parallels the Dionysian "corpus" as a whole, in that Pseudo-Dionysius's first three writings (*Theological Characters*, *Divine Names*, *Symbolic Theology*) examine the names that have been and can be attributed to God (e.g., in Scripture).²⁵ These three works of themselves are instances and demonstrations of the *kataphatic*, or affirmative approach to theology; that is, they examine the ways in which names may be positively attributed to the divine. In his fourth and last work, however, Pseudo-Dionysius presents a new method of using names. L. Michael Harrington says: "While the first three treatises apply names to God, the *Mystical Theology* clears these names away. What the first three treatises affirm, the *Mystical Theology* denies. It is not, then, under the burden of unfolding a name into a graspable content, as is the *Divine Names*, or of attaching

23 *Ibid.*, 40.

24 *Ibid.*, 59.

25 For an invaluable introduction to the historical context of the Dionysian corpus, which addresses Eriugena's contribution to the tradition by way of his translations, see Harrington, introduction to *Thirteenth-Century Textbook of Mystical Theology* (henceforth *Textbook*) 1–38. Pseudo-Dionysius claims to have written the three works mentioned above, though it is likely that *Theological Characters* and *Symbolic Theology* were never written; however, Harrington claims that they "form part of the fictional chronology of Dionysius' own life and work. The *Mystical Theology* is the last of Dionysius' theological works, according to his chronology." (*Textbook*, 4–5.)

an extraneous content to a name, as is the *Symbolic Theology*.²⁶ As the last of the Pseudo-Dionysius's theological writings, the method employed in the *Mystical Theology* denies the affirmations previously made of God. Eriugena takes up this method of affirming and denying divine names, so much so that this methodology of extreme negative theology permeates his entire thought. For Eriugena, while positive theology can indeed affirm truths of God's activity, negative theology is closer to the truth in denying the affirmations made about the divine nature. Whatever is said about God can be contradicted, including the contradiction itself. All things that can be said about the first cause must also be denied. The innovative method of using names (that is, clearing away what has been previously said) developed in Pseudo-Dionysius's *Mystical Theology* attempts to accomplish a genuine appreciation for God's ineffability, which Gilson overlooks in *Being and Some Philosophers*. Carabine characterizes Pseudo-Dionysius's theological method as one that surpasses not only kataphatic tendencies in theology, but also goes beyond the *apophatic* as well. Negative statements are employed in apophatic theology—the *via negativa*, in Scholastic terminology—in an effort not to transfer inadequate attributes to the divine, thus diminishing his transcendence.²⁷ According to Carabine, however, Pseudo-Dionysius develops a hyperphatic way of speaking about God. In Eriugena's translations of Pseudo-Dionysius, this *hyperphatic* method is developed by employing the use of the Latin prefixes *super* or *plus quam*.²⁸ Instead of affirming or denying attributes of God, Pseudo-Dionysius privileges the ineffability—the absolute beyond-ness—of God's nature that remains incapable of being grasped either affirmatively or negatively.

While Gilson is quick to cite passages from Pseudo-Dionysius's *Divine Names* where he specifically says, "God Himself is not," etc., he completely ignores the strange language and hyperphatic approach developed in the *Mystical Theology*, which denies every affirmation about God and emphasizes God's ineffability. As already noted, Gilson—while leaving out certain historical considerations, and failing to appreciate the rich notion of *nihil*—did not really make any fundamental mistake in his presentation of Eriugena's thought. Regarding Pseudo-Dionysius, however, it seems that Gilson is guilty of a worse negligence. Once again, Gilson characterizes Pseudo-Dionysius as ultimately only developing Plotinian principles and places the blame on Plato's sixth book of the *Republic*. Gilson selects a limited amount of text from the *Divine Names* only, which at face-value are incompatible with his own conviction that *He Who Is* is the cause of all beings, and Pseudo-Dionysius is therefore proved wrong.²⁹ Gilson brackets the Dionysian hyperphatic approach to theological language (developed in the *Mystical Theology*) in his rejection of him. Beyond this, Gilson does not seem interested to draw a distinction between the "literary" approaches and methods of these two

26 Harrington, *Textbook*, 7.

27 For a concise introduction to the apophatic tradition within Platonic thought, see Carabine, introduction to *The Unknown God*, 1–10.

28 Carabine, *Eriugena*, 61.

29 *Being and Some Philosophers*, 34.

Neoplatonists. While it is true that Eriugena was actually attempting to articulate an ontological (or, more properly, *meontological*) system that philosophically described the underlying nature of reality, it would not be accurate to attribute the same philosophical/theological goals to Pseudo-Dionysius. The latter's discourse in his works tends to be one of prayer, not only one of philosophical explication or articulation. Taking into account this distinction to be made concerning Pseudo-Dionysius's approach to theology, Thomas A. Carlson says that "[t]he move from a predicative to a hymnic form of language is at bottom... a move in the direction of prayer... that is, a form of language that surpasses the categorical and metaphysical alternative between affirmation and negative."³⁰

Gilson's inability—or unwillingness—to grasp the depth of non-being that Eriugena presents in his *Periphyseon*, then, could be said to stem from his initial mistreatment and rejection of Dionysius's hyperphatic approach to theology. While Gilson is clearly opposed to the Neoplatonists, he is nonetheless forced to allow Thomistic metaphysics to reach its proper conclusion—in Chapter 5 (as well as in the Appendix) of *Being and Some Philosophers*—concerning the real distinction between essence and existence and our knowledge of being. Being (*esse*), insofar as it is truly distinct from essence (*essentia*), cannot properly be grasped by the human intellect precisely because the proper object of the human intellect is the essence, or *quiddity*, of a thing. Being (*esse*) can only be grasped *indirectly* through a certain kind of concept, or judgment. Being as such, then, remains outside the realm of human understanding properly, and this transcendence perhaps points precisely to the Neoplatonic elements in Thomas's own thought which Gilson either rejected or simply did not deal with.

III.

Acceptance of Gilson's metaphysical thesis carries with it a rigid interpretation of the history of philosophy. Hankey claims in his article on Gilsonian Thomism that "[o]ne's history of philosophy is a projection of one's notion of being."³¹ Having examined ways in which Gilson failed to recognize the Christian Neoplatonic notion of being (and, more importantly, non-being) adequately, this charge *prima facie* seems to hold significant weight. Alasdair MacIntyre has put forth a theory of tradition-constituted enquiry in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*—further articulated in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*—which argues for the necessity of dialogue and translatability between traditions.³² Gilson correctly situated Eriugena within the broad Platonic tradition, but failed to situate him within other important mediating traditions. From the perspective of the post-metaphysical theologian, Marion accuses Gilson of denying the "death of metaphysics" and fashioning a historically deformed context to support his own metaphysical thesis. In denying the death of metaphysics, Gilson could be seen from the

30 "Postmetaphysical Theology," 67.

31 "From Metaphysics to History," 180.

32 See "Tradition and Translation," chap. 19 in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, and "In the Aftermath of Defeated Tradition," chap. 7 in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (henceforth *Three Rival Versions*).

point of view of someone like Marion as merely attempting to articulate an erudite account of Thomistic metaphysics, resting upon a metaphysical interpretation of Exodus. Admittedly, it would be most unfair to fashion a strong argument against Gilson in light of very recent developments in contemporary philosophy of religion. But does not Gilson, in *Being and Some Philosophers*, himself judge philosophers of the past not only on a fundamental error of previous philosophers, but also by the effects in the given tradition that followed from that philosopher? Setting this point aside, contemporary post-metaphysical theology would offer a very different interpretation of Exodus in favor of freeing the self-revelation of the Christian God from any and every determination of human thought. To offer one example, Richard Kearney suggests that God of Exodus 3:14 should neither be interpreted as "I who am" nor as "I who am not." Rather, God exceeds being and reveals himself as the possibility to be, as "I am who may be," which precludes the extremes of being and non-being.³³ Gilson's metaphysical thesis would most adamantly not allow such an interpretation, and does not allow for the possibility of such philosophic positions that strive to be both post-modern/post-metaphysical (by taking seriously Heidegger's critique of onto-theology) and Christian. Perhaps Gilson's denial of the "death of metaphysics" is rooted firmly in his inability to appreciate rich insights by a thinker such as Pseudo-Dionysius, who, although he cannot properly be called "post-metaphysical," in many ways is truly *a*-metaphysical.

To return to the Neoplatonists briefly: as already noted (in various formulations), Gilson ignored/overlooked/neglected certain aspects of Neoplatonism which deserved attention. Gilson, however, is not ignorant of these Neoplatonic elements: again, Gilson is writing a philosophy and not a history in *Being and Some Philosophers*. In his lengthy study, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, Gilson devotes one section to "Denis" the Areopagite, and an entire chapter to Eriugena.³⁴ Here Gilson does take up the topics of affirmative and negative theology, and of the Dionysian "superlative theology" (his phrasing for Carabine's "hyperphatic" theology), which conceives of God as "Hyper-Being" and "Hyper-Goodness."³⁵ Gilson identifies Maximus, the two Gregories, as well as Pseudo-Dionysius as authorities and influences of Eriugena.³⁶ In this work he defends Eriugena against the charges of pantheism, as he does in *Being and Some Philosophers*. Thus, in Gilson's *History of Christian Philosophy*, one finds a more generous analysis of these figures. However, even here—in a work that presumably is a work on the history of philosophy—Gilson remains slightly remedial. For example, Gilson claims that Pseudo-Dionysius's formulation of the world's emanation from God and return to its source (the *exitus-reditus* model) becomes commonplace within the Christian theological tradition. However, "[t]he doctrine of Denis called for many precisings and corrections or, rather, for a *reinterpretation*

33 Cf. Kearney, "I Am Who May Be," chap. 2 in *The God Who May Be*.

34 Henceforth *History*; on Dionysius and Eriugena, see 81–85 and 113–28 respectively.

35 Gilson, *History*, 82.

36 *Ibid.*, 127.

in terms of a metaphysics of being," and provided the tradition to follow with only a general framework within which such an interpretation could take place.³⁷ Thus, one finds in Gilson's *historical* work an anticipation for the completion of metaphysics in Thomas's proper account of *being*. Not to belabor this point, perhaps (if any conclusions are to be drawn from this study) as finite beings we are simply doomed to a historical context, and—in agreement with MacIntyre—philosophic pursuit begins with, and remains tied to, deep personal commitments within that context.

Gilson and the post-modern theologians apparently represent *incommensurable* tradition-constituted modes of enquiry, which themselves are part of the larger Christian tradition. On the one hand stands Gilson's brand of Thomism, and on the other, a contemporary position that calls into question that unshakable truth of *esse* (with regard to the ontological or meontological status of God, the proponents receptive to Neoplatonic thought and those who accept the death of metaphysics are conflated here—though these positions are not mutually exclusive). It seems that one's notion of "being" does in fact color the way in which one views and interprets the history of philosophy. According to MacIntyre, "how the history of philosophy is written will depend in key part upon what are taken to be its achievements, what its frustrations and failures. And insofar as the adherents of different traditions and more generally of different standpoints evaluate those achievements, frustrations, and failures in not merely different, but incompatible ways, as they do, to that extent there will be rival, incompatible, and sometimes incommensurable histories of philosophy."³⁸ This "coloring" of the history of philosophy, however, cannot be avoided, and even Gilson is fully aware of it. Gilson, like MacIntyre, is completely aware that "any approach to truth is bound to be a personal one,"³⁹ in that true philosophic enquiry begins in and requires deep personal commitments. Whether or not Neoplatonism seems viable as a mode of approaching the divine (or less, a way of understanding reality) will depend upon the conception of "being" brought to the discussion; Gilson's Thomism—with its metaphysical dogmatism and the history of philosophy that accompanies it—is of a character that affords no such viability. Gilson has claimed that "the truth about [being] cannot be proved, it can only be seen—or overlooked."⁴⁰ If MacIntyre's conception of tradition-constituted enquiry is to be believed, however, then a tradition might reach an "epistemological crisis," a point in which certain critical limitations are recognized in its own development. The remedy to such a crisis, according to MacIntyre, must be sought in a rival, competing tradition. It might benefit Thomism to look to the Neoplatonic tradition indeed, so as to be able to respond better to contemporary movements in philosophy and theology that implicitly take inspiration from Neoplatonism. If Gilson's thesis is anchored upon a personal commitment to a problematic notion regarding being as

37 *Ibid.*, 85 (emphasis added).

38 MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 151.

39 *Being and Some Philosophers*, x.

40 *Ibid.*

at once both revealed and metaphysical, and if this personal commitment renders meaningful dialogue with contemporary positions in philosophy and theology impossible, then it may follow that Gilsonian Thomism remains ill-equipped to recognize and respond to a weighty epistemological (and indeed, metaphysical) crisis.

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