

Doctor's lunch

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Metaphysics and Theology in Tension
(Saint Augustine)

God, the Flesh and the Other, chap. 2

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God, the Flesh, and the Other

From Irenaeus to Duns Scotus



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Translated from the French by William Christian Hackett



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Part One

God

The Onto-Theology in Question

“The fundamental trait of metaphysics is called the *onto-theo-logical*. We are from now on, it seems, engaged in explaining *how God enters into philosophy*.”¹ The way in which the question of God is posed today is found in this well-known formula of Martin Heidegger—certainly in phenomenology, but also in the discipline of medieval philosophy. That *God enters into philosophy*—or rather, *into theology*—I have shown elsewhere with Bonaventure as a guide.² But is a linkage necessary, and furthermore, should we connect this account to the constitution of the metaphysics called “onto-theo-logical”?

And here is precisely the rub. Onto-theo-logy is like the quest for a soul mate: the more one searches for it, the harder it is to find. It is true that the term originates in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (this is textually indisputable), and comes to term in the severe critique of Martin Heidegger (“The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics”).³ But what of its efficacy? Could it be that what remains “unobtainable” is at this point nonsensical? “Onto-theo-logy” is the idea of a leading back of the whole of being (*ontos*) to God as to its principle (*theos*) in a self-contained [*enfermant*] and all-engulfing [*engloutissant*] (*logos*) discourse—it has indeed no rights of citizenship in the history of philosophy. There is not an author who today does not escape from this seemingly acute humiliation [*fourches caudines que l’on croyait pourtant si affrétés*]. From Aristotle (P. Aubenque) to Hegel (C. Bruiaire), by way of Thomas Aquinas (E. Gilson), Duns Scotus (O. Boulnois), Descartes (J.-L. Marion), Pascal (V. Carraud), and even Malebranche (J.-Ch. Bardout)—all the interpreters agree in not recognizing its validity, at least in a historically founded sense. Does this mean that the notion itself means nothing and its tradition of research means nothing? Is it enough to take the “exact contre pied” [precisely opposite position] of the hypothesis of the overcoming of metaphysics in order to restore or rediscover metaphysics as such—beyond the “vulgate du dépassement” [common or crude view of an overcoming] (F. Nef)?⁴

In the perspective of patristic and medieval philosophy which matters to us here, it is fitting to highlight again (see the “Introduction”): “For a medievalist, this characterization (onto-theo-logy) of the essence of Aristotelian metaphysics is valuable, in fact principally as one of the *Latin interpretations of Avicenna* which is imposed in the School” (A. de Libera).⁵ And this Avicennian interpretation of Duns Scotus finds its source precisely in Thomas d’Erfurt, the sort of pseudo-Duns Scotus to whom Martin Heidegger unwittingly consecrated his dissertation of habilitation defended in Fribourg in 1915 (under the title *Treatise on the Categories and Signification in Duns Scotus*).⁶ It is only one step further to conclude from there that onto-theo-logy belongs only to this first theological model encountered by Martin Heidegger at the age of twenty-six.

However, one should guard against hastily made simplifications, which is rather like handing over our own weapons to those who always critique

without ever doing anything constructive. That the structure of onto-theo-logy does not exist in the texts, apart from a particular form of medieval tradition, does not invalidate it as an attitude, or as a manner of thought that is proper to avoid. The philosophers have done their best to castigate the inanity of the model, as have the theologians also in foiling its thrust. Both of them, however, do not remain any less dupes of the systematization to which they are themselves also subject. Those who reject the model rarely challenge the idea of a unificatory and transcendent principle. Likewise, the restoration of ancient categories (essence, substance, properties, or accidents) will not suffice to make us believe in a revival of “metaphysics itself” beyond phenomenology.⁷ The “metaphysical restoration” faults phenomenology for having wanted to cut ties with every form of transcendence, while its “overcoming” has never in reality signified a de-valorization of the divine, but only another manner of approaching it and of speaking about it. Briefly, if onto-theo-logy can now consider itself dead as a concept, it has however not yet admitted its end as “prism”—that is, as “filter” which enlightens by a “new light” the “spectrum” [*spectre*] of the scheme of thought.⁸

But better options exist, I suggest, as far as the “overcoming of metaphysics” is concerned, particularly as it regards the question of God. For the “negative” side of onto-theo-logy as a nearly inaccessible model ought not to make us forget its “positive” side: the quest for an “other language” which is capable of saying the divine otherwise. One could always, as much as possible, accuse phenomenology of selling off the heritage of classical metaphysics. But one will not remove from it, however, the right and the prerogative of the opening of new realms of philosophy until now unexplored—we think here only of all the modes of the everyday described by Martin Heidegger and his followers: anguish, gossip, boredom, fatigue, lassitude, or even birth, joy, exaltation, jubilation, praise, and so on. If there is therefore something to conserve from the phenomenological attempt today, independent of its simplifications of the history of philosophy, it is indeed this opening toward unexplored possibilities. Following the example of a Picasso (cubism), a Monet (impressionism) or a Cézanne (post-impressionism), it opens up into new fields of research of which the very existence has been until now ignored—at least as being reachable from the starting point of philosophy.

God, the flesh, and the other: It goes without saying that we certainly have here three themes present from the beginning of the history of thought. But by starting from the suspension of the *quid* of the thing, and placing it in the perspective that starts from its “how” (*quomodo*), the “descriptive” treatment of these themes nevertheless allows to appear some unsuspected vantages on beings themselves: the primacy of relation over substance in Augustine, God as phenomenon in John Scotus Erigena, conversion as a mode of reduction in Meister Eckhart, flesh as a mode of visibility in Irenaeus, body as substance of the incarnation in Tertullian, and so on [see the “Introduction”]. In each case, what is seen is no longer the simple definition of things, but rather their

mode of appearance, by which these phenomena, so essential to philosophy itself (God, the flesh, the other) have become today all the more recognizable in their own proper *ways of being*. The list of things “disclosed” is certainly important here, but not exhaustive. For the joys of patristic and medieval philosophy are so numerous, though not so easily discovered, and even less brought to light. In order to handle the question of God [part I], it will be fitting therefore *first* to follow—but only for a while—the “negative” side of the *overcoming of metaphysics in its tension with theology* (chap. 1: Augustine). Once the field opens, or rather the moving frontiers are established, then the “positive” side will come, as well as the dazzling *phenomenality of God in his theophany* (chap. 2: John Scotus Erigena) and its *reduction to an impossible reification* (chap. 3: Meister Eckhart).

The question of God [1st part], as that by which it is necessary to begin so as to define his mode of “entry” (into theology or philosophy), also determines our proper relation to our body [2nd part: the flesh] as also to those who surround us [3rd part: the other]. Once again, the “overcoming of metaphysics” will not be overcome or forgotten, finally, if one supposes that phenomenology still has to struggle only with a “structure” that is impossible to find anyway (onto-theo-logy). Rather, philosophy’s task is to illuminate some “existentials” which compose our everyday (God, the flesh, the other). In its phenomenological and mystical mode in particular, patristic and medieval philosophy reveals some *habitus* or ways of being that we will reach in order to interrogate. With Augustine as a guide, we will therefore first show how metaphysics and theology remain always in tension when “God enters into philosophy,” so that “all the categories *undergo a transformation [mutantur]* when they are applied to God” according to the beautiful adage of Boethius.⁹

Chapter 1



Metaphysics and Theology in Tension (Augustine)

Transformation of the Categories

With Saint Augustine, something paradoxically “begins” in philosophy, or rather in theology. Of course, it goes without saying that Christian thought does not begin with the bishop of Hippo. All patristic thought which has preceded him (and we will see what this was in Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen) possesses its own proper greatness. But in this nascent and stormy fifth century—with the sack of Rome and the beginning of the redaction of *City of God* in 410—something new, or nearly new, begins to be forged within theology: namely its dialogue with Greek philosophy and thus metaphysics. The endeavor of Justin, where “philosophy passes over to Christ,” maintains of course its proper value, as does the remarkable metaphysical translation of the theological in the famous “that is” of the Council of Nicaea.¹ But proper to the bishop of Hippo is the attempt to measure its scope, certainly not in order to regulate it, but rather to demonstrate its ambiguity. We cannot resolve the tension *between metaphysics and the theological* so easily. There are numerous contemporary attempts that desire to rediscover completely certain theological schemes independently of their historical and dogmatic deployment, the Trinity or the Incarnation for example. Such are the pretended virtues of a “de-hellenization of dogma” to which these attempts return, sometimes in an artless way (H. Küng). No one today can truly doubt the principle that “the hellenization of the faith is the counterpart to the de-hellenization of its content” (A. Grillmeier).² The question is therefore not, or at least not only about indicting the “indigence of language” and the “indigence of history” in order thus to speak the “truth of Christianity” (M. Henry). On the contrary, it is about measuring, more humbly but perhaps more faithfully, the capacity of men themselves to speak and to translate the “truth of God” into their own “language” as into their own “history.”³

Theological categories do not overcome the concepts of metaphysics to the point of denying or abrogating them. On the contrary, *theologoumena* dialogue with *philosophemes* in order to compel a “transformation” within them (*mutantur* [Boethius]) since they cannot anticipate precisely when “God

enters into philosophy.” In this sense, God comes “into philosophy” only when he enters *also and at the same time* “into theology.” Here the hypothesis of onto-theology collapses on itself: not only in the sense that it is historically inaccessible, but because it remains principally impossible within the insoluble *tension of metaphysics and theology*. We are forced to recognize, then, that the old wineskins do not break so easily under the pressure of new wine, even though the good taste of the new would want to do without the bitter difficulties of the older. The new attempt of Saint Augustine in book V of *De Trinitate* of thinking God as “relation” is original in the way that it refers tirelessly to the older idea of “substance” in book VII, which shows precisely that the prime tension is always only moving toward resolution, and that every attempt at “overcoming” remains no less a profound “nagging conflict.”

The Augustinian discovery of “relation” (book V) is abandoned in fact immediately upon its retrieval, by turning it toward its own transgression (book VII). Speaking hypothetically, if the particular relation to the tradition that we desire to preserve is primarily one of just fecundity, a relation of both “critique and dependence,” and not of a simple rejection or arbitrary denial, then it would obviously be simple pretentiousness or an inordinate gamble to speak of a “missed turn” in Saint Augustine.⁴ Turning back to the source does not mean “thinking against metaphysics” but “excavating the foundation and tilling the soil”⁵—“to sound” (*ergründen*) and no longer “to found” (*begründen*).⁶ To dare to speak and to think a “missed turn” requires the implementation of a “long way to travel” from the source down the river, inasmuch as it was diverted in its trajectory by the alluvium of a falsely metaphysical “onto-theo-logical.” Only that which is before and after the bend determines the turn as taken or missed—as if it were a country path (*Holzweg*) meandering just as much as it clears out an unknown way and opens toward a new future.⁷ If in Saint Augustine there emerges an “official report of a violation,” as if one were witnessing an accident, a true policing of concepts will attempt then to see there, instead of so much misconduct, an opening of a new way even in the failure at the bend. In this sense, the turn will not be termed a failure to the degree that there is found a way opening toward a certain “modification” [*déport*] outside of metaphysics (relation as first category), and will rather be termed a bare sketch, closed and diverted by the force of a tradition and a more potent straight path (the transfer [*report*] of relation in a scheme of substance). Like Galileo, the “discovering and concealing genius” [*dé-couvrant et re-couvrant*] according to Husserl (*Krisis*),⁸ Augustine first “uncovered” in his *De Trinitate* “relation” as the first category of a Trinitarian God (book V), and then “covered over” his discovery in linking it continually—if not in its nature, at least in its activity—to substance, which is thus understood as a philosophical “reading” of the theological (book VII). The conversion of Augustine, conceptual at this point and no longer merely existential, is made thus the index of a true discovery and of a turn taken on the path of faith in search of understanding.

The Genius of the Discovery

Toward a Scheme of Non-Substantial Unity

Metaphysics in Theology. Like Irenaeus and Tertullian who both directly oppose Valentinian Docetism [see chaps. 4 and 5], book V of Saint Augustine’s *De Trinitate* opens with the polemical prerogatives fixed by the Arian opposition.⁹ Instead of denouncing their theses, the bishop of Hippo first denounces their strategy. Consider the direct application in Christian theology of a Greek metaphysical scheme (substance/accidents) to the Trinitarian God revealed in Jesus Christ (Father—Son—Holy Spirit): “Among all the arguments that the Arians usually oppose to the Catholic faith,” insists Augustine, “there is one that they seem to consider the most ingenious of all traps [*maxime callidissimum machinamentum*]: When they say that all the qualifications or concepts applied to God are said not according to accident [*non secundum accidens*] but according to substance [*sed secundum substantiam*].”¹⁰ This passage does not show us that Saint Augustine refuses to attempt a transcription of philosophy into theology—on the contrary, his task will be precisely to accomplish such a transcription in the framework of Christian orthodoxy. Rather it shows us only that the Doctor rejects an application that is too immediate and univocal. If God enters into *theo*-logy, how could it be that a dualizing Greek scheme would be able to articulate in a direct translation the total novelty of a God simultaneously one and triune?

As a mediated translation, the stakes of the Augustinian refutation of Arianism are thus doubled: first, a translation, with the risk, inversely, of never giving faith the means of transmitting its content (Grillmeier); second, one that risks losing the originality of the Trinitarian mystery revealed as such (contra Arianism). Here arises, then, a challenge that is double: how to come to terms with [*assumer*] the inheritance of the Aristotelian categories in order to speak the Trinity (theology), without falling into the double aporia either of pure substantiality or of simple accidentality (metaphysics)? I will now show that such aporias lead, theologically, to the impasses of tritheism and divine mutability.

Substance or the Danger of Tritheism. Apart from two inversions, in book V of *De Trinitate* Augustine explicitly rearticulates the Aristotelian list of categories. This is a confirmation, if there is one, of the necessity for the bishop of Hippo to place himself on the terrain designated by his adversaries: namely, Aristotelian metaphysics.¹¹ However, and here begins the decisive turn, the necessity of a non-immediate translation of the Trinity into conceptual language requires the abandonment of the too-costly (because too exclusive) alternative between substance and accidents: “Nothing in God has an accidental signification [*nihil in eo secundum accidens dicitur*], because there is no accident in him. Nevertheless [*tamen*], everything that one attributes to

him does not have a substantial sense [*nec omne quod dicitur secundum substantiam dicitur*].¹² Once again, this does not imply for the bishop of Hippo that substance and accidents are incapable of speaking God, but only that the primacy of the one (substance as logically and ontologically first) does not authorize one to conceive it independently of its relation with the others (nine secondary categories subject to change and related to substance as their necessary substrate). The Trinitarian God translated *immediately* as substance effectively leads to a tritheistic scheme unacceptable for the Christian faith: to understand God “in the non-accidental but substantial sense”—as “the Arians teach [*cum Ariani dicunt*]¹³—is ineluctably to affix three substances (tritheism) wherever there are three “persons” (Father, Son and Holy Spirit).

Hence the following explication of the thesis of Arius, starting from his immediate transcription of the Trinitarian scheme into a philosophical model: “The Father who is the cause of all beings is absolutely the sole being without beginning [*anarchos*]. The Son, begotten by the Father, created and founded before the ages, was not before his generation . . . he has only been brought into being by the Father. He is not eternal, nor co-eternal, nor co-engendered with the Father.”¹⁴ Moreover, because every substance is spoken such that “by relation to itself [*ad se ipsum*],” neither the Father nor the Son remain then “for” the other, but only “apart” from the other.¹⁵ “An immediate utilization of the schemes of Greek thought,” says theologian Bernard Sesboué, “leads to the placing of the Son on the side of the creature. But the Christian faith has always considered him on the side of God.”¹⁶

The Accident or the Immutability in Question. The profit from rejecting pure substantiality is balanced by a loss no less considerable, namely, divine immutability. With its ataractic fate inadequate for speaking the reality of a God at once one and triune, this first and separated substance leaves no flexibility at all in its implacable incorruptibility as this single determination whose permanence guarantees only the eternity and immutability of God.¹⁷ This is why, inversely, simple accidentality would not resolve the aporia either. To confer on God some “accidental” attributes (quantity, quality, place, time, etc.) actually renders unintelligible the very essence of God, at least from the vantage of classical theology, for which he “remains absolutely immutable” (*omnino incommutabilis manet*).¹⁸ For the massive objection of the divine mutability that results from accidental attribution to God itself contains some unexpected difficulties, much like the no less evident objection of tritheism resulting from the determination of God as pure substance. Not that it would be necessary here to interrogate the immutability or impassibility of God (see Origen [chap. 8, below]), but only that substance is spoken of indifferently in temporality and in eternity, at least from within the theological repetition of Aristotelian metaphysical categories.¹⁹ It is true that the immediate translation from Hellenism to Christianity of the determination of substance to the Father and the Son dangerously confers upon the one an

immutable eternity (the Father as immutable and incorruptible substance) and to the other temporal becoming (the Son as human and temporal). Accidental attribution to God signifies in this sense not that the Trinity is no longer a substance—a very naive objection—but that the Son, as substance, in being incarnate, is given to thought by means of having the determinations of accidental categories (generation/corruption, increase/decrease, change, movement, etc.). “God against God”: such is the dualism, not in the sense of a tension in the Moltmannian manner,²⁰ but of exclusion, by virtue of the opposition of contradiction between the Son as corruptible substance and the Father as incorruptible substance. This does not reach, as it were, the reality either of man, or of God, and even less the God-man. A single proposition suffices to condemn the “Son having begun to be [*coepit esse Filius*]” of the Arians in order to let appear the “Son ever-begotten” of the true Trinity:²¹ “Father and Son are no longer qualifications of an accidental order [*non secundum accidens*], since the one called Father and the one called Son are eternal and immutable [*aeternam atque incommutabilem*].”²²

Tritheism and divine mutability are the two prohibitions imposed in order to exclude at once pure substantiality and simple accidentality and thus to be able to say, in one Greek conceptual scheme, the reality of a Trinitarian God. Is it sufficient then to renounce all properly philosophical argumentation such as the entire Greek scheme itself? Reborn here with force is the warning of A. Grillmeier—of which Michel Henry could also have been one of its addressees—of a necessary “hellenization of the faith as a counterpart to the dehellenization of its content” (supra). Saint Augustine, in a liberating gesture but not one of unbridled liberty, actually works an act of internal transformation of the elder (metaphysics), starting from which is also expressed the formulation of the totally new (revealed theology). Such is the condition for the “uncovering” of relation as the first category in book V of *De Trinitate*, the middle term between the complete substantialization of trinitary tritheism and the pure accidentality of a total modalism.

The Turn of Discovery

The Impasse: Quid Tres? “Therefore, there is no accidental signification in God [*nihil in eo secundum accidens dicitur*], because in him there is no change [*quia nihil ei accidit*]. Nevertheless, everything that is said about God is not said in a substantial way [*nec tamen omne quod dicitur secundum substantiam dicitur*].”²³ If the determination is neither merely accidental nor purely substantial, then what is it? The impasse stands there before us, an unavoidable obstacle without a detour. The bishop of Hippo asks, at the end of his research, in an extremely halting manner: “Since the Father and the Son and the Spirit are three, we seek to understand, therefore: three what [*quid tres sint*]?”²⁴ We have shown, moreover, that the Augustinian question “quid tres?” certainly remains in the sphere of ontology (the empire of *ti esti*,

“what is”), which Richard of Saint Victor will later draw to the side of “*quis* (what)” and Bonaventure toward the “*quomodo*” (how).²⁵ What remains, and to this we shall return, is that this question extracted from book VII of *De Trinitate* resonates in a different way when read in light of book V. The question “three what?” is not here a quest for substance, since “everything is not predicated of God in a substantial sense,” nor an assertion of accident, since in God “there is no accidental signification.” It appears to be the case that only a third term, neither of the order of substance nor of accident, can pull theology out of the ruts of metaphysics—without, however, totally renouncing their usefulness. From out of this tension (between metaphysics and theology) a new way of seeing and thinking God is born, or rather, reborn—now within the context of Christian Trinitarian theology: namely, as “relation” and “person.”

Relation: Ad Aliquid. When the turn is laid down, the discovery is laid bare [*Quand le tournant s'impose, la découverte s'expose*]. A something (*quid?*)—a concept or tool for thought—clears a new path and delivers us from the disastrous alternative. The passage is central here and discloses the turn: “But in God nothing is said according to accident, because in him there is nothing changing. It does not follow that all attribution has a substantial sense, however. There is also *relation*—literally ‘movement toward something’ [*ad aliquid*]—for example the Father toward the Son [*sicut Pater ad Filium*] and the Son toward the Father [*et Filius ad Patrem*] . . .”²⁶ Something (*quid?*) is therefore “relation to another thing” (*ad aliquid*): “movement toward,” from one to the other (*esse ad*) and not the “to be in” of the same substance (*esse in*).²⁷ The example (*sicut*) serves here as a paradigm and not the reverse. Relation is not first discovered in order then to be applied to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but rather the necessary connection of the three (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) requires the concept of relation, first applied to itself and only later to man. “Person” (*persona* or *hypostasis*) makes of God “someone” and not by way of transferring what is first a human category to the divine. It is actually the inverse because God is completely “relational” by nature, and it is within the context of Trinitarian Christianity, precisely, that the “movement toward” (*ad aliquid*) first takes on meaning. The movement of analogy so fully developed by Thomas Aquinas actually begins with Saint Augustine, for whom however the movement does not yet concern being but only relation itself.

The simple expression “*ad aliquid*,” in its narrow formulation and apparent insignificance, ought not therefore to mask the grandeur of the discovery (not yet covered over) and the decision to turn (not yet missed because it was not yet taken). It is in the *prepositions* where a new *proposition* is often articulated. The nuggets often remain invisible to the inexperienced seeker (see the “Introduction”), as does the indomitable turn to the clumsy guide. It is by “extraction and transfer,” as two subsequent operations, that there appears then the discovery where the turn arises.

Extraction and Transfer: A Double Operation. Precisely as a discovery, the “*ad aliquid*” is not left here to be only the translation into Latin of Greek philosophy’s “*pros ti*,” which is ordinarily called “relation” and is fourth among the well-known enumeration of the ten Aristotelian categories, at least as received from the tradition: “substance [*ousia*], quantity, quality, relation (*pros ti*), place, time, position, possession, action, passion.”²⁸ In a theological context, on the contrary, the fourth term (relation) becomes the first (taking the place of substance)—at least in book V of *De Trinitate*. Metaphysics seems not to be able to withstand the weight of the theological, and the tension always seems to be reaching its breaking point. But the operation is not so simple, at least from the vantage of *De Trinitate*, because the bishop of Hippo is not satisfied simply with “de-hellenization” in order to think otherwise. All the while retaining the Greek (the categories), Augustine sees its limits in expressing the Trinity (the primacy of substance and/or some other categories when one needs to resort to the realm of the accident), but is not satisfied with a facile rejection. Instead of jettisoning Hellenism altogether—a temptation which we have seen is ever-present even in theology today (Küng) as also in philosophy (Henry)—Augustine dares to transform it from within.

The first operation is “extraction.” The category of relation (*secundum relativum*) is alone among all the Aristotelian categories capable of supporting—contra the “Son who has begun to be [*coepit esse*]” of the Arians—the sempiternal “Son ever begotten [*semper natus*]” of the “true” Trinity: “Relation is not an accident [*non est accidens*] because it is foreign to change [*quia non est mutabile*].”²⁹ Against the notion of divine mutability tied to the attribution of accidents, the category of relation (*pros ti*) is strangely extracted from the list of categories in order to be divorced from the modes of accidentality and change. Its rank is changed (from the fourth to the first) as well as its nature (no longer simply accidental or connected to substance). Such is the first condition of speaking the novelty of the God who is simultaneously one and triune.

Yet a second operation actually accomplishes the transformation—and brings to light the tension of metaphysics and theology: the “transfer” of this “extracted” category (relation) to another order or another kind of discourse which wants to proceed without reference to substantiality. Neither substance nor accident, suspended between these two orders, the “movement toward” (*ad aliquid*) seeks then another model, even a new “order” that would be adequate to the uniqueness of the object (*quid?*) that it seeks: God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The quest for a conceptual adequation out of a metaphysical discourse (substance and/or accidental categories) capable of articulating the novelty of the mystery (relation) explodes metaphysics itself. In this way metaphysics is less negated or overcome than it is preserved and pushed toward its final limits by theology. The capacity to work and transform (“*mutantur*” [Boethius]) from within the categories of metaphysics measures the very power of God to speak to men in another and new form.

The Quest for Another Model

The Weight of Substance. The sliding of the concept of relation from its prepositional formulation as “movement toward” or “relation to” (*ad aliquid*) to its substantive form as that which is called “according to relation” (*secundum relativum*) appears only at the conclusion of this passage.³⁰ Everything appears as if practiced at this turning point is a resistance to substantification of relation (*secundum relativum*) to the profit of the single “*pros ti*” (“*ad aliquid*”) as “movement toward”—and thus forcing the discovery to be concealed. By virtue of this search, perhaps all the more mystical as it is speculative, the quest for another model of attribution is again made explicit in book VII of *De Trinitate*: “But it is not at all that it is necessary to represent the Father [*nullo modo ita putandum est Patrem non dici*] by this model [of relative essence (*essentia relative*)].”³¹ One will find therefore as many models and as many manners in which God enters into philosophy as there are “reluctances” of theology to install itself directly into the long sojourn that philosophy has prepared for it. The tension between metaphysics and theology is not reabsorbed here, but to the contrary, in this specific example of the formation of Trinitarian concepts in particular, it discloses both the force of its resistance and the weight under which it succumbs. The discourse of substance seems to be all the heavier as the attempt to pass it by seems impossible. From here the attempts to transform previous models are manifestly doomed to failure if they attempt to initiate a novelty that is absolute.

Attempts and Failures to Transform Previous Models. Three inherited models—attempts or temptations—test a total reformulation (in book VII): (a) the scheme of logical attribution (substance/accident); (b) the theology of the Word (signifier/signified); and (c) exemplarism (image/paradigm). The respective failures of each of these attempts at transformation will first invite silence (the impossibility of directly speaking God in a Greek scheme), before proffering a new word, however minimal and for Saint Augustine a word that is always still only stuttering (the necessity, that is, of saying something in order not to remain saying nothing).

(a) The classical scheme of logical attribution, in its own way, rehearses the model of substance and accident. Because their relation of strict opposition has sufficiently shown its aporias, this duality that is all-too sterile seeks to be overcome by means of establishing as fundamental rule of attribution the relation of attributes to their substance “as to their subject [*hypokeimenon*].”³² Hence the complete revisiting by Saint Augustine at this point of the example in Aristotle of “color” related to a “colored body” as accident to substance, out of which he makes a paradigm in order to confirm the repetition of the former scheme of classical logic.³³ Yet the Doctor objects: “It is not certain that by this model it is necessary to represent the Father,” because in God substance and attributes are one.³⁴ In order to return to Augustine’s

anti-Arian interpretation of “Christ the power and wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24), in man “being” and “being wise” are distinguished since being man (substance) does not cease if a man ceases to be wise (accident). In God, by contrast, being and wisdom are united since “to be is to be wise.” In God’s case, the only means of attributing wisdom is in an “essential” manner, not only for Christ but also the Father and the Spirit (*Christum Dei sapientiam*).³⁵ But what remains in such a scheme, at least on a cursory reading, that pertains properly to the Father, Son, and Spirit?³⁶ Against the tendency, or rather Arian temptation, to substantialize the divine attributes in order to predicate them properly to each person of the Trinity, the scheme of logical attribution (substance/accident) fails by the fact that it cannot separate substance and attributes in God.

(b) However famous is the scheme of the theology of the Word, particularly in relation to the contemporary retrieval of the signifier/signified relation, it would no longer be able to resolve the aporia of a triune God who is neither purely substantial nor merely accidental. Its operation is double: first, bringing to light the relation of auto-dependence and of manifestation (*ostensio*) between human words and the realities to which they refer; second, reading into the figure of the Son, the “Word made flesh,” the supreme dignity of the One who sends him, the Father: “If this temporal and ephemeral word that we express manifests itself [*se ipsum ostendit*] and manifests that of which we speak [*et illud de quo loquimur*], how much more the Word of God by whom all things were made? He manifests the Father exactly how the Father is [*quod ita ostendit Patrem sicut est Pater*].”³⁷ The advantage of this new scheme over the former consists in that it no longer thinks of the relation of the Father and the Son in terms of pure exteriority, logically articulated in the form of substance and accident, but according to a structure of return deciphered at the very heart of language and attempts to hold together the divine persons in identity and difference: the Word, even if it “manifests the Father exactly as the Father is,” is “not what the Father is.”³⁸ However, the bishop of Hippo can no longer retain this theological scheme of the Word, but here for the opposite reasons to those related to the first scheme. Whereas the substantialist model (metaphysics), reacting against all division in God, tends necessarily to substantialize the divine attributes, the verbal model (theology) makes the identity in nature of the Father and Son hard to see: the Son, as the signifying of a signified, “exactly manifests the Father” precisely by the fact that “he is not himself the Father.” But how is it possible to continue to say that they are “of the same nature” or “consubstantial” (*homoousios*)?³⁹ In the verbal scheme there remains a certain amount of linguistic extrinsicism and logic of expression, which is probably carefully avoided today by means of the aesthetic model of the Trinity, in its taking account of the sensible (Balhasar).⁴⁰

(c) The last scheme, more Platonic than Aristotelian, is exemplarism, or the relation of image to paradigm. Would the Son relate to the Father as the

“image” (*imago*) to its “model” (*exemplum*)? The usual deficiency seen in the relation of image to model would be enough to reject the proposal as null and void. The necessary equality of Father and Son would thus be superseded until we fell again into the aporias of Arianism. Yet if we kept in the background the Alexandrian distinction between “image” (*imago*) and “resemblance” (*similitudo*) as “image of the image” (*eikôn eikōnos*),⁴¹ the most proper characteristic of the image, when it refers to Christ, consists in rendering the model perfectly and without deficiency: “If the image [*imago*] truly and perfectly renders the object of which it is the reproduction [*perfecte implet illud cuius imago est*], then it is the image which is equal to the object and not the latter to its own image.”⁴² The previous aporia of the theology of the Word, consisting in an impossible identity of persons by virtue of an extrinsicism of the signifying/signified relation appears here to be resolved: as the river flows from its source without changing its nature, “the Word is able to be called the image of God since it is the Father who engenders him.”⁴³ The ancient Platonic (or rather Plotinian) dichotomy of the image (*eikos*) and idea (*eidos*) appears reworked from within as God enters into philosophy. “The image without model [*imago sine exemplo*]: such is the necessary and no less surprising paradox of a God at once one and triune. “The Son is an image without its own model [*sine exemplo*] . . . He does not model himself on a guide that would precede him in relation to the Father from whom he is absolutely inseparable, since he is identical [*idipsum est*] to him who is his source.”⁴⁴

But what could be the rigorous meaning of an image without a model? The bishop of Hippo responds: “Without a model for itself, it is a model for us [*illa sine exemplo nobis exemplum est*].”⁴⁵ The argument here moves from a solution to the Trinitarian aporia to an *imitatio Christi*, as if to speak first negatively about the failure of former schemes to signify God, and then positively about the ineluctable necessity of silencing philosophy, at least for a time, in order to allow God to enter *theo*-logically into *theo*-logy: “Therefore, when it is asked: what are these three things?, or, Who are these three subjects?” the author of *De Trinitate* humbly admits, “we try to find a specific or general name by which we can embrace these three; but no such name is presented to the mind because the transcendence of divinity surpasses the resources of ordinary speech.”⁴⁶ Before the grandeur of the mystery, the philosopher is interrupted,⁴⁷ and the theologian is silenced as well.⁴⁸ Metaphysics, if not rendered destitute,⁴⁹ is at least *put in tension* with theology.

From the Entry into Silence to the Emergence of Word. When silence is imposed, God is exposed. The opening and closing of *De Trinitate* responds to this paradoxical and double exigence of silence and speech. The imperative of silence before the ineffable mystery is the first thing to say: “Now I will be trying to speak of things of which no one, especially me, is able to say as they are thought by God . . . , it is first to this Lord our God, about whom we ought always to think without being able to think him worthily, to whom,

with praise, is due blessing at all times” (book V).⁵⁰ However, there emerges a necessary word—this is the last thing to say: “In order to speak of the ineffable, it is necessary to speak, as one is able, those things which one is not able to understand” (book VII).⁵¹ The bishop of Hippo, more than any other, is wary of hemming theology in by the silence of a deviant mysticism of fusion. For him the absence of discourse is even graver than its exuberant presence. Only God himself can guarantee its legitimacy: “To the Lord our God . . . I pray that he will help me to understand and to explain this that I design as well as indulge my eventual offenses.”⁵² To speak about what “the three of the Trinity” are (*quid tres?*) while not losing sight, as a theologian, of “either his desire [*non solum voluntatis*] or his weakness of means [*iverum etiam infirmitatis meae*]”⁵³ thus depends on the welcome one gives to a word, since it is necessary to speak about that which one cannot explain, and always on the foundation of silence because every human word will remain irremediably inadequate at expressing the profundity of the mystery.

As complex as philosophy and its models are, mere contradiction of its models does not suffice for theology. It is necessary to live in and to transform the tension between the disciplines. Certainly, when God enters into theology, it is fitting to speak otherwise and to speak about another: “If the god enters into philosophy, if therefore philosophy, or more precisely metaphysics assigns to him a determined place, a particular site,” emphasizes Jean-François Courtine, “it is perhaps because God *has left philosophy*, in order to be spoken no more in a discipline that is characterized as special by relation to a more general quest pertaining to being as such, but in an ‘other’ doctrine, perhaps also in an ‘other’ language, with an ‘other’ syntax and according to ‘other’ principles.”⁵⁴ And yet, at the very instant of the uncovering (of relation as first category in book V of *De Trinitate*), the covering over (of the transfer of relation to substance decidedly always posed as originary in book VII) also comes to birth. Would it be in this sense that the irresolvable tension of the *metaphysical* and the *theological* is made manifest, and that to yank theology to a place outside of philosophy is to leave theology to theologians in order better to delineate the proper field of philosophy? The question at the very least is posed, and the constant attempt (or temptation) to break them into distinct orders is not done without interrogating the history of concepts, which is never satisfied with such a neat distinction for the sake of a rapid solution. Augustine struggles more than he resolves the problematic—all to his honor. To accept the resistance or the pressure is not to renounce every position. On the contrary, it is simply to acknowledge a *theological language* always caught up in the movement of the *terms of metaphysics*: “Why do we call the three persons ‘the three’ (*tres personas*) . . . ?,” as I have already asked following Saint Augustine, “except in order to say something [*aliquid vocabulum servire*] and not to remain with absolutely nothing to say [*ne omnino taceremus*], when we are questioned about these three [*interrogati quid tres?*]?”⁵⁵

The Act of Covering

Bearing in mind the previous failures at the transformation of ancient models, it is necessary to begin a new quest, from the starting point of silence, for this other model of theological attribution that we desperately seek. And yet, as I will now demonstrate, the theological explication of revelation is always held in tension with the metaphysics of relation—which is probably a signal that a rupture of orders is not reached in such a facile manner as is usually sought, at least when we carve things up precisely where the discourse appears all the more undividable—always, as we must, attempting to catch the divine in human language.

The Moment of a Crucial Decision

The Decision and Its Destiny. It is well known that the history of thought is first the telling of the story of its “decisions.” If it is mainly about “turns” of thought, then it is here that the course thought takes is more important than its objects, its “way” more important than its terms themselves. The failure of previous models (logical attribution, theology of the Word, and exemplarism) remains too pregnant with possibility for Augustine not to call for another and new order. Everything occurs, from the beginning of book VII of *De Trinitate*, as if the *tension* in the passage from metaphysics to the theological was such that it seems better to reduce the tension by eliminating it rather than resolving it—“to cut the knot instead of untying it,” as Kant said.⁵⁶ Is a crossing into this “other order” possible, and more importantly, is it a path which ought to be taken, both as means of classification and as a command: a non-metaphysical order on the one hand and a demand for another discourse on the other? The question certainly ought to be posed inasmuch as it haunts contemporary philosophical discourse, as well as theology itself. Reread, nevertheless, in light of Saint Augustine as well as from the paradigmatic example of the Trinity as “transformation” of the metaphysical categories when applied to God (Boethius), the response is not self-evident. The moment of crucial decision is at the same time the decision of a particular moment: a “decision of a particular moment” if the act of discovery of relation as first category (book V) always remains covered over by an ontology ever still substantial (book VIII); and a “moment of crucial decision” to the degree that the destiny of Trinitarian theology itself (as understood by Thomas Aquinas) corresponds to the closing of the “discovery” or the “missing of the turn” (Augustine).

The Hypothesis of Another Order. When God enters into theology, is there a “distance infinitely more infinite” or the necessary passage to another order—from God as substance to the Trinitarian God of theology? The eminently Pascalian trait of the hypothesis cannot and ought not to hide the

serious nature of the formulation in the bishop of Hippo.⁵⁷ According to Irénée Chevalier, the famous exegete of Saint Augustine’s thought, the Augustinian request for a new mode of thinking possesses a certain legitimacy, since “relation in God comes neither from substance nor accident but rather constitutes a *separate order*.”⁵⁸ The “relative qualification” of God for certain predicates called “according to relation” (*secundum relativum*)⁵⁹ is in fact opposed explicitly to its “absolute qualification” for other predicates called “according to substance” (*secundum substantiam*):⁶⁰ “Above all,” indicates the Doctor of Hippo, “let us hold that every absolute qualification [*quidquid ad se dicitur*] of this sovereign and divine sublimity has a substantial signification [*substantialiter dicitur*]; and that a relative qualification [*quidquid ad aliquid dicitur*] pertains not to the order of substance but to the order of relation [*relative*].”⁶¹ On the one hand, therefore, the predicates called “absolute” are proportionate to substance when they are “without relation to something” (*ad se dicuntur, non ad aliud*), designating God in his totality: for example, “wisdom” or “power.” On the other hand, predicates called “relative” are related to relation, when “in mutual relation” with each other (*uterque ad invicem*), specifying what is appropriate to each of the divine persons: as “Son,” “image,” or “Word” specifically designate Christ.⁶² To the two distinguishable orders (substance/relation) correspond thus two types of attribution (absolute/relative) and two fields of attributive categories (wisdom, power . . . /Son, Father, image, Word . . .). It is only a small step to conclude from here that the order of relation escapes the order of substance and renders it destitute. The *separate order* of relation (*ad aliquid*) seems *prima facie* to be established in that it apparently has a certain autonomy in its field of application (neither substance nor accident, but appropriate for each person in his relation to the others, etc.).

However, and it is here that the discovery begins to be covered over, or rather that the tension is measured: the scheme of substance, despite the request for a “separated order,” does not cease to exercise its power on the bishop of Hippo, as if metaphysics ought never to innervate theology, and impose itself as co-inhabitant with it. Taking into account the whole of his work, at least the Trinitarian block from books V to VII in *De Trinitate*, requires us not to be satisfied only with the discovery of relation as first and new category that is neither substantial nor accidental (book V), but rather with how it opens in a new way onto substance that is impossible to erase completely from Trinitarian theology (book VII).

The Meaning of a Tension. Again, the hypothesis of a “separate order,” however expressed here, appears to me all the more hopeless as it wants to ignore the metaphysical categories in which theology has been articulated from the beginning. The suspicion of dogma is in reality a mistrust of metaphysics and its categories (Küng). It is not an act therefore of the dogmatic alone, but also of philosophy. The principle of a necessary “hellenization of

theology, would only, according to Saint Augustine, lead the [doctrine of the] Trinity toward the final point of failure: "Let the Son be qualified as essence [*ut essentia*] in a relative sense to the Father [*relative ad Patrem*]" (book VII).⁶³ The ultimate consequence would be to return to a total reversal of the Aristotelian scheme of the categories that would render "essence" or "substance" itself relative to relation, which in the Stagirite is actually the support of relation. It would then receive being and permanence only in and by such a mode of attribution: "But in order to return to the question," concludes the bishop of Hippo, thus achieving a definitive closing of the way that was opened, "if essence itself is taken in a relative sense [*si ipsa essentia relative dicitur*], then essence is no longer essence [*essentia ipsa non est essentia*]."⁶⁴ That "essence would no longer be essence" (*essentia non est essentia*)—not distinguished here from "substance" by Saint Augustine ["in our language (in Latin) essence and substance are commonly synonyms"]⁶⁵—is completely impossible for the Doctor of Hippo. Such a liberation of the category of relation from the scheme of substance—in the Aristotelian sense of *ousia* rather than the Thomist sense of *existentia* (we will return to this shortly)—will be realized only later in modern philosophy and will define its very task. Thus Descartes, who by the "inversion of categories" in the *Regulae*, holds that "absolute and relative are themselves relative terms" in their "relation to us." Then Husserl, who, in completing the hypothesis, also reduced the passage of the cogito to the *res cogitans*, and renders relation itself relative to a simple act of consciousness. In this sense and this sense alone, the *ad aliquid* will be act rather than thing—a deliverance which is already played out, as I will demonstrate, in the interpretation of "conversion" as mode of "reduction" in Meister Eckhart (see chap. 3).⁶⁶

The Unexpected and the Absurd. The hypothesis of an exit from the categories, or the notion of an "essence itself relative," which therefore "would no longer be essence," remains, for Augustine at least, just as unexpected in its decisiveness (*inopinativissimus*) as it is absurd in its reasoning (*absurdum*).

First, the unexpected decision is like the warrior who, in Latin terms, attacks by surprise the one who has not kept on his guard (*inopinatum*). To say that "essence is not essence" (*ut ipsa essentia no sit essentia*) assumes a meaning all the more "unforeseen or unexpected" (*inopinativissimus sensus*) as such a possibility always remains, at least as understood in a pre-Cartesian tradition, unthought and unthinkable.⁶⁷ The decision to close the hypothesis of an absolute primacy of relation over substance does not uniquely consist here merely in not tolerating the possibility that an essence is able to be taken in a "relative" sense: this goes for "all essences" (*omnis essentia*), for example when one designates the attribution of the relative "master" to the substance "man" (the master), while master itself can also designate a substance.⁶⁸ The closure of the hypothesis finds its key, furthermore, in the definitive refusal of a designation of "essence itself" (*ipsa essentia*), in its nature, as

faith as counterpart to the de-hellenization of its content" (Grillmeier) does not indicate absolute submission to dogma without reflection, but tries on the contrary to recognize the metaphysical truth there (substance/accident) where it attempts to articulate the categories of theology (Trinity), thereby being transformed by theology (relation leaping out of the pair substance/accident). In this sense, it would be totally illegitimate to want to renounce all translation or hellenization. The *tension of metaphysics and theology* constitutes the dignity of theology more than it marks some supposed failure. The simplism of onto-theology and the necessity of taking leave of it does not signify its ineptitude, as we have seen (see the "Introduction"), but instead, forgets to disclose the tension because it believes too quickly in some other resolution. It is not a choice between the exiting of metaphysics, on the one hand (to be without it, as Augustine understood, is an impossibility) and a simple transcription into theology on the other (the double aporia of the "tritheism of substance" and the "mutability of accident"). "Relation" (*ad aliquid*) in the Doctor of Hippo becomes the first category in place of substance (the former first category), but not like substance or any other category (being designated as neither substantial nor accidental). The gesture certainly makes a first break with metaphysics and effectively seeks a new order (book V). But substance, as we will see, remains afterward the support and substrate of relation itself (book VII). What is read here as a failure in reality indicates the way toward a greater success. Not in the sense that Augustine finds a way to resolve the tension, but rather that he brings it to light and maintains it there in the impossibility of its reabsorption. Theology is never more philosophical as when it imposes the obligation to pass through philosophy, all the more so when it would desire to surpass it. Likewise, philosophy is never more entangled with theology as when it raises itself to the level of a necessity, albeit in order to be transformed. The act of the recovering of relation (book V) by substance (book VII) therefore indicates the "resistance of substantialist ontology," not in the sense that it would be necessary either to be discarded or submitted to. Certainly a turn is deciphered in the recovering, but it is found in the tension more than in a resolution. The true interest of the metaphysical is found precisely here in its confrontation with the theological—and vice versa.

The Resistance of Substantialist Ontology

The Decision to Close. "Relation" (*secundum relativum*) or "relative qualification" (*quidquid ad aliquid dicitur*) does not suffice to constitute a "separate order" (Irénee Chevalier). However, such was the initial project of the bishop of Hippo. To consider merely the relentless energy with which Augustine tried to evade both pure substantialism and simple accidentality—no one can reasonably deny at least the validity of the attempt (book V). But to follow this hypothesis to its end, that is, to exclude completely substance from

“relative”—which would be a suppression of “nature” itself. According to Saint Augustine—and this should be understood in the “realist” mode of the Aristotelian categories—if there is not some “thing” (*quid*) to which relation is (as it were) related, then “relation” itself is suppressed.

The absurd or the non-sense, for the bishop of Hippo as for all Greek metaphysics, leads to the point of thinking for example “man” or “horse,” said to “exist by themselves,” as terms themselves relative. For, “if there was no man, that is, a substance, then there would be no person to call ‘master’ in the relative sense (and) if the horse was not an essence, there would be no occasion for speaking of a ‘draft horse’ in a relative sense.”⁶⁹ The refusal to speak of the “essence itself” (*ipsa essentia*) in a relative sense, thus putting to the rest the very categories of the discourse from which it derives, finds its source therefore in the resistance of an ontology that is completely Aristotelian, according to which, as the Stagirate expresses it: “it is evidently necessary that, if one knows a relative in a definite way, then one knows also in a definite way *that to which* it is relative.”⁷⁰ Because to render “essence itself relative” is immediately to suppress the very support of all relation and at the same time to invalidate all predication, the resistance of an ontology of substance is forced into condemning as non-sense, or even as absurd (*absurdum*), the hypothesis of an absolute primacy and of an autarchy of relation over substance: “To give to substance a relative sense would be an absurdity [*absurdum*],” asserts Saint Augustine, “because everything subsists by relation to itself [*omnis res ad se ipsam subsistit*]. How much more so with God [*quanto magis Deus*]?”⁷¹

Our concern now appears fully evident. The tension of the metaphysical and the theological is held within the “force of resistance” of metaphysics itself. Would it be necessary to win the combat, and even to enter into the battle—as if the philosopher in his autonomy would always accuse theology of attempting its so-called annexation? In a new way here the position of the Doctor of Hippo has something to teach us. Because, far from demanding either an “exit from metaphysics” or a “de-theologization of philosophy,” the study of medieval philosophy today finds in reality its meaning in the act of the “theologization of metaphysics itself.” Of course, this is not to take leave of philosophy, as is sometimes wrongly believed, but rather on the contrary to remain and attempt the transformation of philosophy from within. Certainly, and I have emphasized, the “other language” of philosophy, and of phenomenology in particular, retains its meaning—especially in the sense that it brings to light new concepts (*infra*). But the dependence of metaphysics itself on theology—not to be confused with the innovation of phenomenology relative to the corpus of metaphysics and theology—is probably, in the first place at least, that which renders the “exit” all the more awkward as it remains always impregnated by that on which it depends, namely, metaphysics itself. The “other language” of that which is to come in the present work—the phenomenon (Erigena), the reduction (Meister Eckhart), the visibility of the

flesh (Irenaeus), its consistency (Tertullian), and its conversion (Bonaventure), intersubjectivity (Origen), its angelic model (Thomas Aquinas), and its singularity (Duns Scotus)—on the contrary stems from this very tension of metaphysics and theology.

In the context of philosophy, “absolute and relative” would never have in this sense been called “relative themselves in their relation to us,” as in Descartes (*supra*), if for example Augustine had not first attempted, in a mainly theological way, to think the “*ad aliquid*” as pure relation in the Trinity in book V of *De Trinitate*. As often happens in the history of philosophy, the modification of concepts pass by God first in order then to be applied to man (we will see the exemplary way in which the status of alterity in contemporary accounts derives from the status of angels in the Middle Ages [chap. 8]). In this sense one does not have to regret that the bishop of Hippo in his *De Trinitate* had related “relation” (book V) to “substance” as its only possible support (book VII) since this covering over makes patently clear, if not the exit of theology from metaphysics, at least their necessary and insoluble tension.

The Categorical Function of Relation. The question imposes itself with insistence. Faced with the prohibition of an essence itself relative, and as much “unexpected” as “absurd,” is there still a way to bring the gesture to its term and to liberate definitively relation (*secundum relativum*) as a separate order? Otherwise said, could the bishop of Hippo not have broken under the weight of an ontology of substance and be delivered from the force of its resistance? Even though not envisageable according to an Aristotelian scheme, the only operation which had perhaps allowed, if not the liberation, at least the untying of “relation” enchained to “substance,” had been that which does not accord (as book V does) “absolute qualification” to substance, and therefore implicitly does not accord “relative qualification” to a categorical function. Two reasons, however, prohibit such an emancipation: a dogmatic and a polemical one. First, the dogmatic reason: the father-son “relation” introduces an asymmetry of correlation (the impossible inversion of terms)⁷² not suggested by the Aristotelian model of “*pros ti*” which is based on the reciprocal relation among friends or neighbors.⁷³ Because it would be necessary to respect the equality of the divine persons, and that this asymmetry puts it in danger for Saint Augustine, the equality takes the step beyond asymmetry and therefore asserts substance over relation.⁷⁴ The polemical reason: the question precisely of the equality of the divine persons, largely presented in the polemic of book VI of *De Trinitate*⁷⁵ against the Arian inequality,⁷⁶ confers a certain occasional character and a primarily heuristic origin to the conceptualization of relation in Saint Augustine. As Irénée Chevalier has rightly emphasized, this explains, perhaps, why “relation is never presented for itself, as a prolonging of the reflection for the sake of satisfying the legitimate avidity of the spirit (but) rather gives the impression of being unilateral and incomplete.”⁷⁷

Where is the significance of the discovering of "relation" (*ad aliquid*) but in the very incompleteness of the thought, at least in its quasi-immediate recovering? "Above all let us maintain," states the bishop of Hippo, "that every absolute qualification of this sovereign and divine sublimity has a substantial signification; however [autem], a relative qualification pertains not to the order of substance but to relation."⁷⁵ How, indeed, by a simple juxtaposition of two types of attribution (*autem*) and in the enigmatic conciseness of the formula, no more or no longer to connect from then on relation to substance as its necessary substrate, even though it would happen, moreover, by extraction and transfer, which as we have seen, is neither categorical nor accidental? The tension remains here insoluble as it stands between, on the one side, the introduction of the term of relation—against the aporias of Arianism (tritheism and divine mutability)—that is neither substance nor accident, and, on the other side, the retro-application of relation to substance as its support and necessary foundation (distinction between absolute and relative qualification). Non-categorical as far as *name* (book V)—"in God nothing is said to be according to accident . . . it does not follow, however, that every attribution has a substantial sense . . . , there is also relation"⁷⁶—the "*ad aliquid*" does not remain less as an ordinary category as to *its function* (book VII): "if there was no . . . substance, there would no longer be one who could be named in the relative sense."⁷⁷ The discovery of the theological in book V for the sake of properly speaking of the Trinity (the *ad aliquid*) gives way under the weight of metaphysics in book VII in always connecting it to a "*quid*" capable of justifying the question of "*quid tres sunt?*"⁷⁸ In *Saint Bonaventure et l'entrée de Dieu en théologie*, I have shown that Augustine's avowal of a quasi-failure to say what there is to the notion of person—"one indeed answers three persons [*tres personae*], not that it might be spoken, but that we might not remain with nothing to say [*non ut illud diceretur sed ne taceretur*]"⁷⁹—comes not from the impossibility of giving an intelligible account of *persona* in order to articulate the *Trinitas*, but from the question which is posed (*quid?*) from the beginning. One will probably have to wait until the interrogation of "*quid tres sunt?*" of Augustine passes progressively to that of the "*quis tres sunt?*" in Richard of Saint Victor and the "*quomodo tres sunt?*" of Bonaventure in order for the "empire of the *ti esti*" which governs metaphysics and theology even now to be finally and definitively developed.⁸⁰

Relation in Becoming

Subsistent Relation. By means of an overly rapid reading, one would wrongly accuse Aquinas's notion of "subsistent relation" (*relatio subsistens*) of simply achieving the work of substantial recovering begun by Augustine—the first term distinguishing the persons ("relation") and the second unifying them in a single essence ("subsistent"). Certainly, to define with Thomas Aquinas

in the *Summa Theologiae* the "divine person" (*persona divina*) as a "relation as subsisting" (*relationem ut subsistentem*) is to pose the relation as "mode of subsisting" or as "way of substance" (*modum substantiae*) (1a q. 29).⁸⁴ But for Aquinas substance is not only "mode of subsistence" or "dwelling," despite the etymology of the term (*sub-sistens*) and Heidegger's error in interpreting it.⁸⁵ The *Summa* in reality states the inverse, at least when it understands the definition of the being of God as "act of existence" (Aquinas) and not "mode of subsistence" (the false accusation of Heidegger): "Being [*esse*] is said in two ways," insists the author of the *Summa*, "in a first sense in order to designate the act of existence [*actum essendi*], in a second sense it indicates the composition of a proposition [*compositionem propositionis*] . . . If one takes Being in the first sense, we can neither understand God's being [*esse Dei*] nor God's essence [*nec eius essentiam*]" (1a q. 3).⁸⁶ The debate concerning being—"with" or "without" being—is well-known and there is no need to revisit it here, except perhaps to insert into the debate the specifics of "relation" in the Trinity. This much, moreover, is accomplished by its author, Jean-Luc Marion, who, in a famous retraction, made the point. *God without being*, most fully understood in Thomas Aquinas, is not understood as a God without "acts of being" but only of a God whose being would be falsely extended to the "community of entities" of all beings. Said otherwise, Thomistic being itself paradoxically escapes "the prism of onto-theology," however sought and hardly ever found (see the "Introduction").⁸⁷

Far from being relieved or resolved, the *tension* of metaphysics and theology therefore remains understood in Thomas Aquinas. Or rather, it is reinforced all the more as it is stated in the language of being (*esse*). And thus the transformation penetrates into its mold: it is no longer only *ousia* as "substance" or "mode of subsisting" which pertains to theology when God enters into philosophy (Aristotle perhaps), but *existence* as "act of being," that is to say, as gift *before* being, or better as gift *for* being (Thomas Aquinas). Aristotelian "substance" is distinguished from the Thomist "act of being," for that which is hypothetically true of *ousia* according to Martin Heidegger—"being receives the imprint of the presence and the consistency in the sense of *subsistence* (*ousia*)"⁸⁸—will never be the *esse essendi* of Thomas Aquinas. Aristotle's "*being in act*" is never identified with the "act of being" of Thomas Aquinas, precisely because the second *gives* in order to be while the first *is* in order to give.⁸⁹

The exit from metaphysics—the detachment and then reattachment of the category of "relation" to the substance/accident pair—paradoxically operates *within* metaphysics itself, at least when it passes through the filter of medieval philosophy. Similar to the ruse of the hedgehog (in Grimm's fairy tale) placing his hedgehog wife at the finish and passing himself off as "already there" wherever the hare runs, metaphysics is therefore "always there" when theology is tried within it—but the difference is that the second totally modifies the first (primacy of relation over substance in Saint Augustine), all the

with the Other as interlocutor, this relation with an existent—precedes all ontology; it is the ultimate relation in being. Ontology presupposes metaphysics.”⁹⁵ In short, and the issue is clear at least since the Levinasian reversal of Heidegger’s comprehension of being where the other is subsumed as one among other categories: relation definitively outweighs substance (agreement with Heidegger on the refusal of reification) and metaphysics as relation over ontology as much as being (the difference between Heidegger and Levinas). The tension of the categories of classical metaphysics (substance/accident) with Augustinian Trinitarian theology (discovery of relation as first category), does not therefore seem resolved (with no solution found or sought), but does at least seem surpassed (in a definitive exit from substantialism). The deliverance of relation from the prism of ontology, commencing with Saint Augustine, is certainly accomplished with Levinas, but pays the price of a strong secularization of relation, where, now, it “would be false to qualify this metaphysical relation [in the Levinasian meaning of the term] as *theological*” (Levinas).⁹⁶

One reaches then the questioning that now must be raised, albeit for the renewal of the concept of the Trinity: “The relation [*rapport*] to the Other [in Levinas] is thematized on several occasions as a relation [relation]. By what right does one use here a category eminently ordained for ontology? In order to attain that which, par excellence, is supposed to escape ontology? (Marion).”⁹⁷ The quest at least has the merit of “pushing” the hypothesis “to its end”: that is, of extricating it from its last entrenchments and exhausting its possibilities. If it is a matter here of unraveling the relation of substance, or better of ordering ontology to an alterology, would it not be fitting to eliminate the usage of “relation” completely, since its term always supposes some external poles that it does not intend, and a sort of “overhanging attitude” [*attitude de surplomb*] which is not fitting for the veritable “Conciliation” (*Anstrag*) of being and the existent? The interrogation is certainly radical, but is at least worth being raised. Otherwise said, and in our own proper terms: would not the “metaphysical relation” in the Levinasian sense of the term (alterology) actually be “metaphysical” in the classical sense of the term (relation between poles)? Whether by inverting the categories (primacy of relation over substance) or exiting from them (alterology without ontology), is it not true that one still remains a slave to metaphysical categories themselves by dint of always using them?

It is clear that the tension between the metaphysical (substance) and the theological (relation) in Saint Augustine, or of Levinasian metaphysics (alterology) and Heideggerian ontology (conciliation), is far from being weakened and even less dissolved. The exercise of philosophy always remains precisely to be said in a language which is hardly sufficient for it, as if words are never able to suffice, particularly when it is a matter of speaking of God. To pass to the “other language” (as I have emphasized) that negates neither the tension nor accepts onto-theology except as a “prism” for thought (see

while serving it (modification of the concept of “being” in Aristotle to the “act of being” in Aquinas).⁹⁰ The metaphysical categories “are transformed [*mutantur*] when applied to God” (Boethius).⁹¹ Theology does not destroy them in order to pass to another order, but only works from within them in order to attempt to render them adequate, as far as possible, to the novelty of the object studied: the Triune, and therefore relational (*ad aliquid*) God.

Extension of Relation. One cannot reproach in this sense Thomas Aquinas, as some do, for having falsely separated God and the world, the immanent Trinity and economic Trinity, God *ad intra* (Ia, q. 2–43) and God *ad extra* (Ia q. 44–119). A unified reading of the *Prima Pars* of the *Summa*, starting from the concept of relation, shows on the contrary, in the *ad aliquid*, the community of relation of God to himself (*ad intra*) as also to the world (*ad extra*). The personal God defined as “subsistent relation” (*relatio subsistens*) in the treatise on the Trinity (Ia. Q. 29) is also the God who is author of the world thought as “relation” (*relatio*) in the treatise on creation: “creation posits something in created beings, but only according to relation [*secundum relationem*]” (Ia q. 45).⁹² The homonymy of “relation” here, in the double relation of God to himself (Trinity) and to the world (creation) posits a “dependence [*dependentia*] of created being to the principle that has established it” such that the category of “relation” (*relatio*) designates what is proper to the “creation” (*creatio*): “*creatio est de genere relationis*” (*Contra Gentiles*, II, 18).⁹³ Far from the false accusations of Heidegger concerning a creation thought as “production,” to which we will have occasion to return,⁹⁴ in Aquinas the extension of “relational” relation that defines the Trinitarian structure of God himself (the person) to his relation to the world (creation) holds together in unity the *Deus ad intra* and *Deus ad extra*, immanent and economic Trinity, God in himself (*per se*) and God for us (*pro nobis*). The tension of the metaphysical and the theological does not appear here to be resolved but rather extended. Relation and substance: the connection between them applies not only to the Trinity (Saint Augustine), but also to the creation (Thomas Aquinas).

Negation of Relation. However, a question remains, which could allow contemporary philosophy to interrogate medieval philosophy, and its modification of the Aristotelian scheme in the name of God’s entry into theology (Trinity). The category of “relation,” as is well known, is now largely utilized by every history of philosophy, to such a degree that its primacy over substance, at least at the opening of book V of Augustine’s *De Trinitate* (and covered again in book VII), seems today to have become the common currency of phenomenology—for example, in Emmanuel Levinas: “Being before the existent, ontology before metaphysics . . . The terms must be reversed,” one reads in *Totality and Infinity*. “This ‘saying to the Other’—this relationship

the “Introduction”), one comes perhaps to accept the displacement (*meta-phorēin*) while at the same time believing oneself still capable of predication concerning God, particularly relation itself: “It would be necessary for us to understand that this category of relation [*hanc categoriam relationis*],” indicates Erigena, whose radical apophaticism will now be our focus (chap. 2), “following the other categories [*sicut et ceteras*], is also predicable of God only in a metaphorical sense [*translative*].” Indeed, the Carolingian continues, displaying an insightful understanding of the aporia of Saint Augustine’s *De Trinitate*, “the category of relation will no longer be counted among the ten kinds of category, if it becomes predicable in the sense proper to God [*si pro-prie de Deo dicitur*].”⁹⁸



Thought is radicalized when it attempts to say something new. The price to pay is certainly a tendency to reject everything else. Such is, however, not the gesture of phenomenology nor of medieval philosophy itself—in which case it would be necessary for us to continue the interrogation of tradition and to dialogue with our own modernity. It would be a matter therefore of speaking “God” (1st part) before describing the “flesh” (2nd part) and of clarifying the structures of the “other” (3rd part). The *tension of the metaphysical and theological* in Saint Augustine (chap. 1) passes then to the *phenomenological* in John Scotus Erigena (chap. 2), in order finally to be found in the *reduction* at work in the concept of conversion in Meister Eckhart (chap. 3). After the attempt of an exit from metaphysics as complex as it is difficult to carry out (Augustine), the God of Christianity is revealed now as a “*phenomenon*” in the double meaning of the term: phenomenologically, on the one hand, and in its everyday sense on the other (Erigena). The God of Christianity is “*God phenomenon*” in the sense that, phenomenologically speaking, he “appears [*apparuit*]” and “is manifest” (*phainō*) according to a strange correspondence between theophany in Erigena (*Periphyseon*) and the definition of phenomenology in Martin Heidegger (*Sein und Zeit*). And the God of the Christians is also a “*phenomenon*” in the current sense of the term, in the measure that he sometimes shows, I suggest, an individuality such that we are dazzled at the humility in the mystery of the incarnate Word: “Do not be surprised that the flesh, that is, mortal man, is capable by grace to become a child of God, when it is even more miraculous [*maioris miraculi*] that the Word is made flesh” (Erigena).⁹⁹

Chapter 2



God Phenomenon (John Scotus Erigena)

The transition through the displacement and overcoming (chap. 2) of the category of “relation” (chap. 1) simply does not work. For if it is necessary “to say something in order not to be left saying nothing at all” (Augustine), then what we have just said (“relation,” as specific to the Trinity, was always referring to substance) could be rendered mute if we were content to speak “metaphorically” about God, without ever ascribing anything to him “literally” (Erigena). The tension of metaphysics and theology certainly appears indissoluble, but its resolution will not come through its denial, which bears the opposite risk of destroying what we had yet to build: this progressive measuring of the force of resistance of substance, which is impossible, or at least very difficult, to surpass (chap. 1). The other way remains (chap. 2): not a way that forgets the dialogue with metaphysics, but one which maintains it, so much so that it opens onto “another phenomenality,” or even better, onto a new mode of speech. Interesting indeed, John Scotus Erigena is not the kind of thinker who claims absolute novelty. His deep knowledge of Greek, so rare in the Carolingian epoch, on the contrary, makes him particularly suitable for our discussion, if also rather controversial. In this sense, and this sense alone, if there is a necessary exit from ontology toward phenomenology—speaking from within the framework of a contemporary rereading of the Erigenian corpus—then it is precisely in this sense that the debate about the divine is all the more “ontologized” (metaphysics) as it causes another figure to appear, that of a “phenomenalized” God (theophany): “It is not only the divine essence [*essentia divina*] that connotes the word God,” emphasizes Erigena, gesturing toward a radical break, “but also this mode [*sed modus ille*] under which God is shown [*ostendit*] to the intellectual and rational creature . . . which is frequently also called God by Holy Scripture. The Greeks are accustomed to calling this mode a theophany [*theophania*], that is, an appearance of God [*hoc est Dei apparitio*].”¹

Theophany and Phenomenology

We must nevertheless be careful here. In proposing the mediation of essence (*essentia*) by theophany (*theophania*), or of the ontic (*quid*) by this mode