

PHILOSOPHIZING IN MARY: THE TEST CASE OF ANSELM'S ARGUMENT

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“Can we not indeed say that ‘we can truly know’
God *because* Mary has contingently brought him forth
through her own body, within the order of creation,
in a way that is epistemically vastly superior to (though
perfectly compatible and ultimately identical with) the
god of the philosophers as enabled
by the old metaphysics?”



INTRODUCTION

September 14, 2023, marks the quarter centennial of the encyclical *Fides et ratio*. Devoted to the relationship between faith and reason and written by a philosopher-pope, it immediately brings to mind—and makes explicit reference to—the 1879 encyclical *Aeterni Patris* by Leo XIII. Both encyclicals are concerned with the relationship between faith and reason in the modern era and stress the important and indispensable role of philosophy for the Church. The nineteenth-century encyclical was crisp, concise, and programmatic in spirit, proposing a very specific approach and

project—and inspiring a worldwide academic movement to study the philosophy and theology of the scholastics, especially that of Thomas Aquinas. The twentieth-century encyclical was much less a programmatic clarion call and more a broad and earnest call to openness, awareness, and mutual *rapprochement*—and it has not really ushered in a new chapter in the intellectual life of the Church.

But *Fides et ratio* does end with a very specific suggestion which can be developed into a programmatic clarion call for a distinct approach and project. Its very last paragraph, worth quoting in full, claims a deep harmony between philosophy and Mary, the *Sedes Sapientiae*:

I turn in the end to the woman whom the prayer of the Church invokes as *Seat of Wisdom*, and whose life itself is a true parable illuminating the reflection contained in these pages. For between the vocation of the Blessed Virgin and the vocation of true philosophy there is a deep harmony. Just as the Virgin was called to offer herself entirely as human being and as woman that God's Word might take flesh and come among us, so too philosophy is called to offer its rational and critical resources that theology, as the understanding of faith, may be fruitful and creative. And just as in giving her assent to Gabriel's word, Mary lost nothing of her true humanity and freedom, so too when philosophy heeds the summons of the Gospel's truth its autonomy is in no way impaired. Indeed, it is then that philosophy sees all its enquiries rise to their highest expression. This was a truth which the holy monks of Christian antiquity understood well when they called Mary "the table at which faith sits in thought." In her they saw a lucid image of true philosophy and they were convinced of the need to *philosophari in Maria*.¹

Although it might appear to be a mere pious afterthought coming from a decidedly Marian pope, the aim of this essay is to argue and demonstrate, philosophically, that this suggestion can become extremely fruitful and creative indeed. In one of the relatively few texts specifically dealing with this final paragraph, David Meconi also concluded that this paragraph "is anything but some spurious or pious addendum."²

1. *Fides et ratio*, 108.

2. David Vincent Meconi, "Philosophari in Maria: *Fides et Ratio* and Mary as the Model of Created Wisdom," in *The Two Wings of Catholic Thought: Essays*

Moreover, the intimate link between Mary and philosophy is older than the encyclical. The recently canonized Titus Brandsma surmised a link between philosophy and Mary in the early twentieth century, indicating that in her and through her we could find a new philosophical approach to God after each of the preceding historical approaches had outlived their viability.³ There is at least one specific medieval reference to this idea, whereby Mary is called the “Christianorum Philosophia.”⁴ The encyclical itself gives a patristic reference for Mary as “the table at which faith sits in thought.”⁵

However, the purpose of this essay is neither to adduce precursors to this idea, nor to provide methodological or other types of meta-arguments for such a Marian approach to philosophy, nor to develop a *theological* argument for the validity or fecundity of this approach.⁶ Rather, the goal is to approach this idea from within philosophy and to demonstrate its philosophical value by actually philosophizing in Mary—*philosophari in Maria*.⁷ We will do so by applying it to a “hard case” for the

on *Fides et Ratio*, ed. David Ruel Foster and Joseph W. Koterski (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 86.

3. Titus Brandsma, O. Carm., *Maria: Een Trinitaire Theologie*, Sijbbolet Filosofie (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Sijbbolet, 2020); Inigo Bocken, *Meer dan een voorbeeld alleen: de mariale filosofie van Titus Brandsma* (Antwerp: Halewijn/Adveniat, 2020).

4. Jean Leclercq, OSB, “Maria Christianorum Philosophia,” *Mélanges de sciences religieuses* 13 (1956): 103–06.

5. The reference for this quote in footnote 132 reads, “*He noera tes pisteos trapeza*” (Pseudo-Epiphanius, “Homily in Praise of Holy Mary Mother of God,” in *Patrologia Graeca* 43, ed. J. P. Migne [Paris: Imprimerie Catholique, 1864], 493).

6. For some excellent articles in this direction, cf. Mauro Mantovani, “Philosophari in Maria,” *Nuova Umanità* 147–148, no. 3–4 (2003): 333–50; Prudence Allen, RSM, “Mary and the Vocation of Philosophers,” *New Blackfriars* 90, no. 1025 (January 2009): 50–71.

7. For some previous attempts in this direction in the fields of philosophy and philosophical theology, cf. Michaël Bauwens, “A Mariological Metametaphysics,” *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 80, no. 3 (May 27, 2019): 255–71; “An Institutional Metaphysics for the Trinity: Family, Unity and Mary,” *TheoLogica: An International Journal for Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology* 6, no. 2 (December 31, 2022): 219–44; “From Searle to Scotus and Back: Institutions, Powers, and Mary,” *The Heythrop Journal* 64, no. 1 (January 2023): 3–15; “Towards a Spousal Metaphysics of the Eucharist: Persons, Powers and Mary,” *Münchener Theologische Zeitschrift* (forthcoming).

relationship between faith and reason—the proof of the pudding is in the eating, after all. Since there is arguably no better way to test the relationship between faith and reason than in the case of arguments for the existence of God, and there is arguably no better candidate among the arguments for God’s existence than Anselm’s argument in the *Proslogion*, this article will attempt to *philosophize in Mary* by taking Anselm’s argument as a test case.

The section after this introduction will give a general account of what philosophizing in Mary could actually be, from a philosophical perspective. Very briefly, philosophizing in Mary means taking Mary’s epistemic position epistemologically seriously. Given Mary’s intimate and distinct relations to the three divine persons as daughter, bride, and mother, the three main parts of this paper will read Anselm’s argument consecutively from the epistemic position of daughter, bride, and mother. This could raise two preliminary worries.

First of all, such a trinitarian reading in addition to the Marian reading seems to introduce further unwarranted theological presuppositions, thereby invalidating the philosophical value of the argument—in direct contradiction to the earlier claim that, by philosophizing in Mary, philosophy’s “autonomy is in no way impaired.” The next section will explain this point more thoroughly, and the essay as a whole is meant to demonstrate it, but it might be worth responding to these objections at the outset. Such a Marian-trinitarian reading is merely, though crucially, a specific hermeneutical approach to Anselm’s argument in order to parse properly the argument *qua* philosophical argument. It offers three distinct ways of philosophically accessing Anselm’s *unum argumentum*, but it thereby remains a philosophical argument.

One could compare it to seeing suddenly how a slightly blurry two-dimensional picture represents a three-dimensional object, after receiving a suggestion in that direction. Such an insight does not suddenly turn the two-dimensional picture into a three-dimensional object, but it can help us to see better what is in the two-dimensional picture, once we know that it represents a three-dimensional object. Similarly, the validity of Anselm’s argument *qua* philosophical should in no way be impaired by such a reading, but should be clarified by it—being able to understand better its structure and to clarify possible misunderstandings.

A second objection may come from the opposite direction. Although it is customary to present Mary's three relations to the divine persons in the theocentric order of Father-Son-Spirit as daughter-mother-bride, the order proposed here is anthropocentric: Mary's own chronological order of being daughter first, bride second, and mother third—she was the bride of the Holy Spirit before becoming mother of God the Son. If the first objection was concerned with harming the autonomy of philosophy from the side of theology, there might be a similar but opposite concern that such an approach would end up giving too much credence to philosophy, thereby impinging upon the autonomy of theology and ultimately the transcendence of revelation through a kind of covert rationalism.

Similarly to how the Incarnation ultimately hinges upon the very possibility of a specific created substance (the human nature of Christ) to reveal the Creator fully to us, the theological question that arises here is whether and how a specific created person from within the order of creation could bring about that very Incarnation in three distinct relations to the three divine persons. If a created nature is no impediment for the autonomy and transcendence of God, but in fact the way par excellence through which God reveals himself, why could a created person not fulfill a similar role, intimately connected to the Incarnation?

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHIZING IN MARY?

Let us start with the most elementary question: what is “philosophizing in Mary”? The above-quoted paragraph from the encyclical, even when read by a sympathetic philosopher, does not immediately offer a substantive philosophical argument or clear conceptual distinctions. For a less sympathetic philosopher, it could be just vague talk about a “deep harmony” and a “true parable.” The proposal as a whole could then certainly come off as encapsulating philosophy (and Mary) within an overall theological project and perspective—a covert return to the submissive and subservient *ancilla theologiae*. Hence, this section is devoted to asking the preeminently philosophical, as well as Marian, question: “How can this be?” (Lk 1:34). How would “philosophizing in Mary” precisely work *philosophically*, that is,

without becoming a kind of covert theology merely disguised as philosophy?

As already indicated, our proposal is that philosophizing in Mary means taking Mary's epistemic position epistemologically seriously. In an almost trivial way, we have no problem accepting the epistemic privilege or even superiority of some philosophers due to intelligence, historical position, observed events, education, etc. Plato had Socrates as a teacher; Aristotle had Plato as a teacher. In both cases it made quite a difference for them as unique participants in the perennial philosophical dialogue, but without detracting from the philosophical genius or autonomy of Plato or Aristotle themselves. Even nowadays the question of where and from whom one received one's education is deemed highly significant.

In the same way, Mary's intimate and long-lasting relationship with Christ—she knew Christ longer than Aristotle was Plato's pupil—surely is a reason for taking her seriously as a philosopher, since Christ uniquely claimed to *be* the truth (Jn 14:6), which is philosophically extremely relevant, to say the least. We are not begging the question as to the divinity of Christ. Arguments still have to be made and ascertained with all the required philosophical rigor—as for the arguments adduced by Plato and Aristotle. In the first place, it is merely about taking Mary as a philosophical starting point for doing philosophy, not as a substitute for doing philosophy.

Christ is of course uniquely believed to be the truth by several billion people, and while counting heads never was and never should be a substitute for doing philosophy, it is arguably a reason to consider Mary to be part of the philosophical canon. The Western philosophical tradition might be wrong in taking Plato and Aristotle so seriously—and several philosophers who became in their turn part of the philosophical canon thought so—but to take their writings seriously as a starting point, not a substitute, for philosophical investigations, remains a legitimate philosophical move. Moreover, Mary was in turn the teacher of St. John, whose gospel is definitely the most philosophical one: it includes Christ's claim to be the truth (Jn 14:6), and his prologue, which provides a dazzling interface between Greek philosophical thought and revelation.

Again, those who are skeptical about Christ's claim of being the truth have nothing to fear, since arguments still have to be made and ascertained with the required philosophical rigor—"how can this be?" The proponent of this approach could even raise the stakes by claiming that, if Christ indeed is the truth, it is to be expected that Mary's intimate relation with him had some philosophical benefits. Hence, if no such advantages can be found or argued for, it could raise doubts on the status of Christ himself. If truth itself was revealed at some point, it is to be expected that this somehow made a positive difference for philosophy—without harming philosophy's autonomy and integrity, since God himself is claimed to be the Logos of human reason. Hence, if Mary was in no way epistemically privileged, the prospects for a deep harmony between faith and reason, as called for by the encyclical, and thereby echoing a solid two millennia of Catholic tradition, could even be cast into doubt.

Moreover, given that these two encyclicals were especially concerned with modern reason and modern philosophy, philosophizing in Mary should be able to address more specifically modernity's focus on the epistemic subject—from Descartes, Hume, and Kant, to Marx, feminism, and decolonization. It is easy and understandable to read these modern philosophies as attacks upon the classical *adagium* to do philosophy *sub specie aeternitatis*—from the perspective of eternity, the perspective of a perfect and atemporal epistemic subject. The modern concern with the historical and creaturely epistemic position of any subject doing philosophy seems to threaten the very credibility or trustworthiness of philosophy to reach timeless epistemological and metaphysical insights. Since the latter are, in turn, important prerequisites for the very ability of natural reason to make trustworthy claims about divinity, revelation, life after death, etc., it is understandable why *Aeterni Patris* and *Fides et ratio* were written at these relatively recent points in Church history.

But what if we can meet these modern critiques of traditional philosophy on their own terms, precisely by taking Mary's epistemic position epistemologically seriously? What if Mary, and only Mary, is Descartes's epistemic subject without presuppositions, pride, or prejudice, in virtue of her humility? What if she experienced God as Hume's empiricism asked for and derived an "ought" from the "is" of the countenance of the divine babe

in her arms? What if she encountered God “within the bounds of a mere creature” as implicitly asked for by Kant? What if she did not merely interpret the world differently like all other philosophers but radically changed it as called for by Marx? What if she, *as* a woman and *because* she is a woman, was able to accomplish a philosophical feat greater than which none can be conceived by bringing forth the ground of creation within creation—not a grand unified theory on paper but the one Word in human flesh? What if her bodily integrity and free *fiat* was and remains the ultimate bulwark against any form of colonization or heteronomy because the Annunciation and Incarnation provide the perfect model for a truly free interpersonal dialectics? In brief, what if the mind of modern philosophy is restless, and its rest is found in Mary?

Finally, philosophizing in Mary could in turn also lead to advances in (philosophical) theology. *Fides et ratio* crucially points to the Annunciation and Mary’s *fiat*, thereby highlighting theology as a human endeavor and as the child of philosophy—a revealed supernatural nature clothed in weak human flesh. The contingency and historicity of that Incarnation and inculturation need thereby not lead to a radical skepticism toward theology as a science of revealed truth, as long as it is rooted in Mary’s, and hence philosophy’s, primordial ability to know truth and reality. The long-standing discussions about the Hellenization of Christianity could then be reread from a Marian perspective. Modeling theology after Christ both enables its distinctness *qua* distinct *subject* while maintaining its point of departure in the encounter with, and as the fruit of a positive response from, philosophical thought. These general remarks should suffice as an overall framework for this reflection on philosophizing in Mary; now we turn to practicing it.

DAUGHTER

This first section approaches Anselm’s argument from Mary’s epistemic position as daughter of God the Father. Although it need not be argued for here, it is arguably a truth accessible through natural theology—*qua* personal creatures of a personal Creator, we are all in some sense daughters and sons of that

Creator. At least as an analogy, we can see in the child-parent relation the same kind of metaphysical dependence that is present, though infinitely more radically, in the Creator-creature relation. The kind of metaphysical dependency this points to is crucial for our first reading of Anselm's argument, that is, reading it *as a daughter*.

Philosophically, it means reading Anselm's argument as it is found in his *Proslogion* by starting with his *Monologion*, which in fact reflects the order in which he himself wrote these texts in a combined intellectual effort. Of course, the argument in chapter 2 of *Proslogion* is meant as a stand-alone argument, and the point here is not to deny its validity as a stand-alone argument. Reading it with the *Monologion* explicitly in the background merely serves to highlight a specific aspect of Anselm's argument.

Chapter 1 of *Monologion* starts with an argument for God from goodness. Starting from mundane kinds of goodness, Anselm quickly ascends with a Platonic line of argument to the highest good through which all good things are said to be good. In chapter 2 he briefly points out that this also implies "greatness"—the crucial, though not exclusive, term in the *Proslogion*. He explicitly connects these two notions as follows: "I do not mean great in terms of size, like some sort of body; but something which, the greater it is, the better or more valuable it is, like wisdom."⁸ Continuing with chapters 3 through 7 of the *Monologion*, he makes it explicit that this notion of "greater than" encompasses the relation of metaphysical dependence, which thereby ultimately refers to an ultimate source of all being. The chapter titles serve as a good summary:

3. That there is a Nature, through which is, all that is, and which is through itself, and which is the highest of all that are. 4. On the same thing. 5. That, just as it is through itself and others [are] through it, so it is from itself and others from it. 6. That it was not brought into being through any assisting cause, but nevertheless is not through nothing or

8. Anselm of Canterbury, *Monologion*, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 13.

from nothing; and how it can be understood to be through itself and from itself. 7. How all other [things] are through it and from it.⁹

Hence, Anselm's phrasing in chapter 2 of the *Proslogion* as *id quo maius cogitari non possit*, that is, "that greater than which nothing can be thought," is (also) referring to the dimension of "greatness" as metaphysical dependency that Anselm developed in his *Monologion*. The next step is then to connect this with the certainty of our own being in an Augustinian-Cartesian way. One's own being is not standing outside of the metaphysical chain of being of which *id quo maius* is the source and summit—for surely it would be greater if that source and summit were to be the source and summit of all of being, including that of the reader of Anselm's argument. That "greatest nature," from which and through which is all that is, is thereby necessarily and even first and foremost that from which and through which one derives and receives one's very own being as an epistemic subject.

Given Anselm's explicit reference to Augustine, one can note that Augustine takes the certainty of one's own existence as the very point of departure for his proof for the existence of God in his dialogue with Evodius in *De libero arbitrio*, book 2: "So, to start off with what is clearest, I ask first whether you yourself exist. Are you perhaps afraid that you might be deceived in this line of questioning? Surely if you did not exist, you could not be deceived at all."¹⁰ The Cartesian phrasing is remarkable and well known. It is characteristic for the modern subject to *start* the search for certainty within one's own subjectivity—which is not to say that it should *end* there, as was indeed not the case for Augustine.

A little further in the dialogue, Evodius comes very close to the *id quo maius* phrasing: "I do not call 'God' that to which

9. Translation mine. "3. Quod sit quaedam natura, per quam est, quidquid est, et quae per se est, et est summum omnium quae sunt. 4. De eadem re. 5. Quod, sicut illa est per se et alia per illam, ita sit ex se et alia ex illa. 6. Quod illa non sit ulla iuvante causa ducta ad esse, nec tamen sit per nihil aut ex nihilo; et quomodo intelligi possit esse per se et ex se. 7. Quomodo omnia alia sint per illam et ex illa."

10. Augustine, *On the Free Choice of the Will, On Grace and Free Choice, and Other Writings*, ed. Peter King (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), para. 2.3.7.20, p. 35.

my reason is inferior, but that to which none is superior.”¹¹ Inserting chapters 3 through 7 from the *Monologion* between these two points in the dialogue can link the indubitability of one’s own being with that of *id quo maius*. That greater than which none can be thought must be the very source and summit of all of being, hence also of my own being. Therefore, it must be at least as real and certain as my own being.

We can further amplify this Augustinian reading of Anselm’s argument against the background of a passage from the *Confessions*, taking Augustine’s notion of “over” to be fulfilling the same role as Anselm’s “greater than.” For Augustine, it refers both to the light unchangeable of the eternal truth, as well as to a Creator-creature relation:

Into myself I went, and with the eyes of my soul (such as it was) I discovered over the same eye of my soul, over my mind, the unchangeable light of the Lord. . . . Superior to my soul, *because it made me*; and I was inferior to it, *because I was made by it*. He that knows what truth is, knows what that light is; and he that knows it, knows eternity.¹²

Hence, the common objection that Anselm’s argument does not prove the real being of *id quo maius* is mistaken because the “greater than” relation also encompasses the relation of metaphysical dependence for one’s very own being, for which the father-daughter relationship is a prime example. A parent is “greater than” a daughter because the daughter is born from her parents, and can doubt their existence even less than she can doubt her own existence.¹³ Reading Anselm’s argument from the epistemic perspective of Mary as daughter prevents us from missing that aspect of Anselm’s “greater than.”

Overall, reading Anselm’s argument as daughter highlights a Cartesian-Augustinian line of interpretation that would

11. *Ibid.*, para. 2.6.14.54, p. 42.

12. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. William Watts (London: W. Heinemann, 1950), bk. 7.10, pp. 371–73 (emphasis added).

13. I owe this point to a brief informal remark by Rocco Buttiglione, “John Paul II and Religious Liberty,” presented at the 5th Annual Summer Seminar of the Hildebrand Project (“The Struggle for the Person: The Teaching and Witness of Pope St. John Paul II and Dietrich von Hildebrand”) in June 2015.

render Descartes's famous *cogito ergo sum* argument into something like *cogito ergo genitum sum*—I think therefore I discover that my existence depends on something, or I was born from someone, higher than me, which or who is therefore at least as indubitably real as I myself am. The Cartesian subject ultimately stays within itself, even in recognizing the existence of God or the epistemological need for God. But the Augustinian subject finally fully loses itself in, and thereby finds itself within, the relationship with the divine subject—as a daughter fully entrusting herself to, or throwing herself into, the arms of her father who wishes nothing more than to grant and affirm her existence.

Transitioning from the Cartesian to the Augustinian subject in light of this Marian reading of Anselm would start from the role of the *ergo* on which the Cartesian argument hinges. Clearly a light is recognized there in light of which the *ergo* works at all—a light that at the same time warrants the conclusion of the “to be” of the subject and must therefore “be” at least as much as the subject whose being is thereby recognized. Augustine ultimately recognized this unchangeable light as that (subject) which made him and is therefore the source and summit of all of being. In brief, reading Anselm's argument as a daughter can guarantee the reality of *id quo maius* starting from the Cartesian-Augustinian certainty of one's own existence, while arriving at that which is greater than one's own existence.

BRIDE

Mary's next relation and next epistemic position is that of bride. Whereas her relationship as daughter points to the *Monologion*, her relationship as bride points to the often neglected first chapter of the *Proslogion*, where Anselm expresses his loving desire for God. Some phrases even remind one of the spousal spirit of the *Song of Songs* in the longing of the loving bride for her bridegroom: “Come then, Lord my God, teach my heart where and how to seek you, where and how to find you. Lord, if you are not present here, where, since you are absent, shall I look for

you?”¹⁴ In another well-known passage, he makes it clear that the relationship between reason and faith he envisions is rooted in the heart that loves: “But I do desire to understand Your truth a little, that truth that my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe; but I believe so that I may understand.”¹⁵ Just as the final paragraph of *Fides et ratio* is not a mere pious afterthought, so too chapter 1 of the *Proslogion* is arguably not a mere pious preface but a crucial epistemic step.

The epistemological significance of this step is that in order to know something, especially in order to know *someone*, one has to first of all “desire,” in the sense of fully entrusting or “devoting” oneself to that object or person. One must first decide to give one’s time and attention to an epistemic object before it can become known. The intellect is not the slave of the passions, but it is true that we will only dedicate our intellect to an object if we desire (or long, or love) to know it. However, a curious regress comes up when we inquire into the reason for devoting oneself to a particular object—any purported answer only kicks the can down the road. If one devotes any time and attention to object A because of reason B, the question becomes why one devotes any time and attention to reason B, etc.

For any intellectual pursuit, then, the primordial question is what we are ultimately looking for—who or what do we love? The only reasonable answer would seem to be a love for truth itself. And as Thomas à Kempis acutely observed in *The Imitation of Christ*, it is crucial to keep this first reason or last end clearly in mind always lest we digress in our intellectual pursuits. This is a passage worth quoting in full:

Why should we concern ourselves with such philosophical words as *genera* and *species*? He whom the eternal Word teaches is set free from a multitude of theories. *From this one Word all things come into being*; all things speak this one Word, and this Word, who is the beginning, also speaks to us. Without this Word no one can understand or judge correctly. He for whom all things are in the One, and who

14. Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, edited by Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 84–85.

15. *Ibid.*, 87.

refers to all things in the One, can remain steadfast in heart and abide in God's peace.

Oh God my *Truth*, make me one with You in *eternal love*. Often I become weary with reading and hearing many things. You are all that I want and desire. Let all teachers be mute and all creation keep silence before You. Speak to me, You, and You alone.¹⁶

In a couple of lines, he sketches an illuminationist epistemology pointing to the highest and sole truth itself as that which we are (or should always be) looking for (and longing for, and loving) in, through, and beyond whatever intellectual pursuit of genus and species, argument and counterargument. Anselm's argument from goodness and being in the first chapters of the *Monologion* is here applied to truth as well—whatever truth we long for and can find in our talk about genus and species is found in the one supreme truth without which no man can rightly judge or understand anything whatsoever.

Therefore, this also applies to any argument about the existence of God. Returning to Augustine's dialogue with Evodius, he ultimately points to truth itself as the endpoint of their quest for a philosophical approach to God:

Now I had promised you, if you recall, that I would show you that there is something more exalted than our mind and reason. Here you have it: the truth itself! Embrace it if you can and enjoy it; "Take delight in the Lord and he will give you your heart's longings" [Ps. 36:4 (37:4 RSV)]. What do you long for more than to be happy? And who is happier than one who enjoys the unshakeable, unchangeable, and most excellent truth? People cry out that they are happy when they embrace with passionate desire the beautiful bodies of their wives, or even of prostitutes. Shall we doubt that people are happy in the embrace of the truth?¹⁷

Hence, we should long for the truth itself with a love greater than which none can be thought, if we are to find it. We have to love the truth itself more than all multiplied questionings about

16. Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. and ed. Joseph N. Tylenda, SJ (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), bk. 1.3, p. 6.

17. Augustine, *On the Free Choice of the Will, On Grace and Free Choice, and Other Writings*, para. 2.13.35.137–38, p. 58.

genus and species since it distracts and ultimately obstructs our love for, the intensity of our search for, and our ability to find that one truth. In relation to the general point about the bride as an epistemic subject, it points to the importance of an erotic desire for the truth as a precondition for finding it. Pure truth will only reveal itself when it is ardently desired for its own sake. The distrust toward the epistemic subject expressed by Thomas à Kempis is justified in our (not Mary's) case precisely because the subject has to be purified in his desires and loves.

Moreover, spousal love in the sense of fully "entrusting" and "devoting" oneself is especially a necessary requirement for getting to know another *person* intimately. Consider the double sense of "knowing" another person by comparing the old Eve (Gn 4:1) with the new Eve (Lk 1:34). In both cases, knowing another in that sense is only possible if both persons have fully and mutually entrusted themselves to one another through a spousal covenant. In Dutch, the word for trusting someone (*vertrouwen*), being faithful (*trouw zijn*), and marrying someone (*trouwen*) are almost exactly the same. The sentence "marrying someone is trusting that person to remain faithful" would read *trouwen is iemand vertrouwen om trouw te blijven*.

One might object that this is begging the question about the personal nature of God, but we could reply that even the god of the philosophers ought to possess at least all the perfections of the highest creature; if "personhood" is one of them, it ought to apply to God as well—and supremely so. Moreover, it is not an innocent philosophical presupposition that God is some neutral and passive "thereness," a lump of clay always available for our peeking investigations about its possible existence when we happen to be so inclined.

Again, the modern turn toward the subject has distinct epistemological implications for one subject trying to get to know another subject, if approached in a spousal and Marian way. At the same time, as we already noted, it can be rooted in the *Monologion's* chapter 1: given that Anselm's supreme nature is supremely good, it is quite reasonable that in order to know that supreme nature to the point of seeing it for what it is, or who it is, requires first of all that one indeed loves that good above all else. Going back even further, to the common philosophical root for both Anselm and Augustine, it is worth looking at

Plato's *Symposium*, his famous dialogue on eros and erotic love. The ascent of erotic love as sketched by Diotima in Socrates's speech culminates in the vision of a pure (and impersonal) beauty that strongly resembles Anselm's reasoning in the *Monologion* and *Proslogion* combined.¹⁸ Anselm's chapter 1 in the *Proslogion* could then be read as a two-page summary of the erotic impulse fueling both Diotima's ascent and Augustine's restless heart along the hundreds of pages of the *Confessions* as a precondition for his eventual encounter with God. The above quote from the *Confessions* continues thus, "Charity knows it. O eternal Truth! and true Charity! and dear Eternity! Thou art my God, to thee do I sigh day and night."¹⁹

At the very summit sketched by Diotima, however, it is not a matter of desiring to possess that highest good or beauty, but to give birth and bring forth in beauty—reminiscent of the classical adage that "goodness is diffusive of itself" (*bonum diffusivum sui est*): "'For love, Socrates, is not, as you imagine, the love of the beautiful only.' 'What then?' 'The love of generation and of birth in beauty.'"²⁰ One can thereby see Diotima as a prefigurement of Mary, who, as a matter of historical fact and through her ardent spousal love, brought forth and gave birth to that pure goodness himself, the very source out of which and from which is all that exists.²¹ That we have Mary as our guide just like Socrates had Diotima as his guide does not detract from the philosophical nature of the ascent. This inherent move from spousal desire to giving birth in the beautiful immediately brings us to Mary's third relation: mother of God the Son.

18. For a fuller treatment of the relevance of Plato's *Symposium* for Anselm's argument, see Michaël Bauwens, "Door het hoofd naar het hart: godsbewijzen zo oud en altijd nieuw," *Communio: Internationaal Katholiek Tijdschrift* 46 no. 2 (2021): 107–24.

19. Augustine, *Confessions* 373.

20. Plato, *Symposium*, in *The Dialogues of Plato*, vol. 1, trans. Benjamin Jowett (London: Oxford University Press, 1892), para. 206, p. 577.

21. For more on Diotima as a philosophical prefigurement of Mary, see Bauwens, "A Mariological Metametaphysics"; Sigmund Bonk, *Diotima, Sophia—und Maria: Platons Diotima und Jesus Sirachs Sophia als Verweise auf "Maria, Sitz der Weisheit"* (Regensburg: Verlag Schnell & Steiner, 2020).

MOTHER

Only now, in the epistemic position of Mary as mother of God, do we arrive at the famous chapter 2 of the *Proslogion*, which describes God as “that greater than which nothing can be thought” (*id quo maius*). The fact that it can be *thought* is crucial given Anselm’s objective to do philosophy, to use natural reason—*fides quaerens intellectum*. What is crucial for that purpose is that *id quo maius* can be known by, that is, it can become an epistemic object for, an epistemic subject. At the same time, the *id quo maius* definition takes a carefully balanced position between a positive and a negative approach to natural theology—the negative phrasing “greater than which *nothing* can be thought” avoids the phrasing of a “supreme nature” that was strongly present in the *Monologion*, and which is more susceptible to an ontotheological critique. This subtle balance does justice to both the requirement that *id quo maius* indeed is an epistemic object for a created epistemic subject, while also and necessarily moving beyond any objectification because in this case the epistemic and metaphysical position of the knowing subject is lower than that of the object known.

That the knowing subject is epistemically and metaphysically *lower* than the known object is crucial for reading Anselm’s argument as a daughter. But the modern philosophical critique of a naive metaphysics and epistemology, famously put forth by Kant, can be felt here in its full weight. In this context, it can be rendered as follows: How is it at all possible for a created epistemic subject to have its very own Creator as an epistemic object? How can something that is a product of “the system” understand “the whole system” as if it were standing outside of it? Does not the very distinction between “lower” and “higher” that was so crucial for the first reading as daughter invalidate any attempt to know what is higher from the epistemic position of that which, or of one who is, lower? Does not the lower thereby fool itself into thinking that it can rise above the higher? Would not the ultimate recognition of the higher *as* higher force us to recognize its unknowability? In short, the concern pertains to the possibility of proving the existence of God, or knowing God more generally, in or through the creaturely reality of a human mind or a philosophical argument—a string of words, sentences, or ideas in

the mind of a human being. That is all we ever have “in front of us” as an epistemic object. How could that enable us to know the very ground of all being, including our own, truly?

Can these worries be addressed by turning to Mary’s epistemic position as mother? For a start, as reported by Eadmer, Anselm went through a serious personal and intellectual crisis between writing the *Monologion* and the *Proslogion*. He went through great intellectual pain and labor to “give birth” to his “one argument” that would combine or distill all the different arguments of the *Monologion*. One can give this a first (metaphorical) Marian reading: Mary also brought forth something, or rather gave birth to someone—the one Word, the one truth through which all other truths are true.

But *why* did Anselm do that? Apparently, he sensed that he could only truly and fully make known something once he could bring it forth within our own order of creation—as a string of words on paper or communicable in a dialogue with his fellow monks. In fact, he prefaces both the *Monologion* and the *Proslogion* by stressing that his fellow monks had entreated him to put these thoughts on paper, and others had subsequently started copying them, thereby enabling us, centuries later, to know, study, and discuss his argument. Returning to Mary, her bringing forth God within the order of creation—writing the one Word in human flesh and blood—enabled us to know God much better than any argument set forth by philosophers in favor of the god of the philosophers ever did or could do. Bringing forth (an argument for) God *as* an epistemic object within the created order does indeed make quite a difference.

This very point raises another issue. The typical modern move away from the scholastic *verum est ens* (being is truth) toward Vico’s *verum quia factum* (true because made by us), as famously noted by Ratzinger,²² can hereby be reconsidered. The traditional *verum est ens* approach was and remains crucial for the first approach—Mary’s epistemic position as daughter. In combination with the classical convertibility of being and goodness, it also undergirded the second approach—Mary as bride in her love for the highest good. But as Ratzinger remarked, what is crucial

22. Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 31ff.

and distinctive about the *verum quia factum* is that “all that we can truly know is what we have made ourselves. It seems to me that this formula denotes the real end of the old metaphysics and the beginning of the specifically modern attitude of mind.”²³

However, given what we have just noted about the epistemic object in the case of Anselm and Mary, what if we interpret that *verum quia factum* in light of the *verbum caro factum est* (Jn 1:14) as enabled by Mary’s *fiat*? Is not the very contingency of her *fiat* by which the truth itself became *factum* the real source of the “end of the old metaphysics”? Can we not indeed say that “we can truly know” God *because* Mary has contingently brought him forth through her own body, within the order of creation, in a way that is epistemically vastly superior to (though perfectly compatible and ultimately identical with) the god of the philosophers as enabled by the old metaphysics? It would not only enable a Marian reading of Vico’s statement, but thereby also open up a Marian reading of the new metaphysics that modern philosophy brought forth. Ratzinger continues with Marx and the shift toward the *verum quia faciendum*²⁴ (truth is what can and must be changed) and as already noted in the earlier section, this Marxist statement can be given a distinctly Marian reading. She changed the world much more than any philosopher—or even any other created human person—ever did, especially by her contribution to how her son, the truth itself, indeed changed creation by saving it.

What Anselm did in chapter 2 is modeled upon what Mary did on Christmas Eve—bringing forth within creation something that at the same time necessarily reveals the Creator. What Mary did in flesh and blood, Anselm did with ink and paper—the latter a faint echo of the former, of course. She is therefore arguably the philosopher par excellence, bringing forth the ground and principle of reality not by words in a book but in the mortal, though resurrected, flesh of this world. The subtle balance and distinction between a positive and a negative approach achieved by Anselm’s *id quo maius* is mirrored by the subtle balance and distinction between the human and the divine nature achieved through Mary in the hypostatic union.

23. *Ibid.*, 31.

24. *Ibid.*, 35.

However, if Christ is the truth and Mary brought forth Christ, it could raise the worry that Mary is thereby bringing forth truth in a way that makes her equal to God the Father. This objection would seem to be merely a philosophical version of Nestorian concerns, which should be assuaged in the same way: the *Theotokos* dogma of the Council of Ephesus did not equate Mary to one of the divine persons. No more and no less is meant here. In the same way that any (sufficiently Platonist) philosopher believes himself to be “bringing forth” an eternally pre-existing truth within the order of time without thereby placing oneself at the origin of (that) truth in eternity, so Mary’s bringing forth the truth within the order of time does not put her on the same level, or at the origin of, truth itself from all eternity.²⁵

As for our reading of *id quo maius*, reading chapter 2 as referring distinctly to the Son highlights chapter 15, entitled “How He Is Greater than Can Be Thought.” There, Anselm adds that God is also *greater* than can be thought:

Therefore, Lord, not only are You that than which a greater cannot be thought, but You are also something greater than can be thought. For since it is possible to think that there is such a one, then, if You are not this same being something greater than You could be thought—which cannot be.²⁶

There is a tension between chapter 2 and 15. How can *id quo maius* be *thought*, on the one hand, which is central to Anselm’s entire project, yet at the same time be *greater* than can be thought? How can both chapters be referring to one and the same thing? The tension is also present within chapter 15 itself: is it really possible to think that there is something greater than can be thought? Of course it can be thought in the way that “the ineffable” is quite effable because of the word “ineffable.” But it would invite the above-mentioned modern criticism that, precisely because it is allegedly greater than can be thought, its very existence cannot be ascertained by human thinking. How can chapter 2, having established the reality of *id quo maius*, and chapter 15, continuing in the same logic yet referring to something apparently different from *id quo maius*, be thought together?

25. My thanks to Josef Seifert for his insistence on this point.

26. Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, 96.

We mentioned in the beginning that philosophizing in Mary could also lead to issues in philosophical theology. One way out of this tension could be to map the distinction between chapter 15 and chapter 2 onto the trinitarian distinction between Father and Son. The Father is greater than the Son, yet he is one with the Son. The Son is that greater than which nothing can be thought, but he is in that sense thinkable as being thought by God the Father. The Father is thereby greater than can be thought as the one preceding the one greater than which none can be thought. The Father is in that sense distinct from the Son, yet he is one with the Son, as the logic of Anselm's argument requires. This "greater than" relation, then, refers to the sense in which the child is born from the parent, but not the other way around, while still referring to the one divine nature. This greater-than relation was also used in the Father-daughter relation we discussed above, whereas in this trinitarian dimension it would refer to the Father-Son relation. The distinction can be accounted for if the first relation also implies the distinction between Creator and creature, whereas the second one implies a distinction within God, of one and the same divine nature. Evidently, in both cases creaturely language is used analogically, but it would be interesting to explore contemporary questions about gender in light of these distinctions.²⁷

CONCLUSION

Mary came to know the Holy Spirit in and through her spousal desire for truth—"which my heart believes and loves." Through her knowing of the Spirit, Mary came to know the Son as someone brought forth by herself—*verum quia factum*. By bringing forth the Son in time, she came to know the Father as the one who brought forth the Son from all eternity. On Christmas Eve, Mary could truly say in time what the Father says in eternity—

27. Cf. Bauwens, "An Institutional Metaphysics for the Trinity: Family, Unity and Mary"; D. C. Schindler, "Perfect Difference: Gender and the Analogy of Being," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 194–231; David L. Schindler, "Catholic Theology, Gender, and the Future of Western Civilization," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 20, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 200–39.

ego hodie genui te (Ps 2:7), today I have brought you forth—participating as creaturely mother in the fecundity of God the Father in a way greater than which no *creature* can be thought to participate in it. By knowing the Father, she came to know herself as being brought forth by the Father in time—“superior to my soul, because it made me; and I was inferior to it, because I was made by it.” By knowing herself, she achieved that ancient philosophical maxim to “know thyself.”

The aim of philosophy is, in the words of Wilfrid Sellars, “to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term.”²⁸ Both *Fides et ratio* and *Aeterni Patris* are concerned with making sure that the term “broadest” is understood in the broadest possible sense of the term, including the possible reality of a Creator, of something (or someone) above human nature, of revelation, etc. To philosophize in Mary, then, means to understand how Mary is the creaturely starting point in that effort to come to know the union of Creator and creation. But, returning to Marx once more, Mary’s goal is not merely to *understand* the union of all things but to make sure this union is maintained. As a type of the Church, Mary is not only a *magistra* who teaches her children to understand how all things hang together, but she is also a subject acting in and through history to make sure all her children are united as one.²⁹ □

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28. Wilfrid Sellars, “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man,” in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1963), 1.

29. This point, which I owe to Rocco Buttiglione, could open an avenue for a Marian philosophy of history. This essay was presented in embryonic form, and received valuable feedback, at the conference “Christian Philosophy and Its Challenges,” at the Jesuit University Ignatianum in Kraków, Poland, on September 21, 2022. It was later presented in more complete form at the Hildebrand Summer Graduate Residency at the Franciscan University of Steubenville, Ohio, on July 10, 2023. I expressly wish to thank all the participants of the Residency for their invaluable comments and enthusiastic suggestions.