IS THE POSSIBLE DOING JUSTICE TO GOD?

by

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Actus justitiae est reddere debitum. Sed Deus nulli est debitor. Ergo Deo non competit justitia.

Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, I., ques. 21, art. 1

I would have preferred not to speak of God. I don’t deny the possibility of speaking to God; the great Judeo-Christian tradition has done it and still does. But speaking of God is particularly risky in philosophy, by using ideas, concepts, and categories which might turn out to be irrelevant to God (or not worthy of Him).

I hope He will forgive me nevertheless, to speak of Him in this chapter, taking into account the fact that this is a reply to a friend of mine whom I like and sincerely admire. Long before Heidegger asked, “How does the deity enter into philosophy?” Pascal opposed the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to the God of philosophers. In the wake of these great forerunners, Richard Kearney in The God Who May Be suggests thinking of God not as an actuality, but rather as a possibility, and to initiate a hermeneutical-poetical approach to the divine, rather than to seek him through the onto-theological determinations of standard metaphysics.

My goal in the following pages will not be to refute this highly respectable position that Kearney maintains with a great deal of talent and with such poetical insight. It would be preposterous to negate the possibility of religious faith. It would be even more dangerous and illegitimate to claim God is an absolute impossibility. Even the most determinate and coherent atheism is erected within the framework of a possibility it rejects, on the ground of arguments in favor of a more valuable thesis, namely, God might exist, but we also have sufficient arguments against this possibility.

Abraham, Job, David, and the prophets directly speak to God. They don’t speak of God as theologians and philosophers do. This being
admitted, are philosophers guilty of arguing and seeking reasons in regard to God? Certainly not. Kant demonstrated once and for all that the search for argumentation in the metaphysical domain is unavoidable, for it reveals the very structure of pure reason.

But how is it possible to advance beyond classical metaphysics? Is a discourse on the possible opening up new horizons? Is the possible doing justice to God? My first reply will be negative: the possible as a philosophical category cannot do justice to God. Does it completely preclude the possibility of the impossible, this new kind of possibility which Kearney suggests? I shall eventually answer maybe—how could I be expected to exclude any kind of possibility?—provided certain methodological precautions are taken.

The Possible as a Philosophical Category

As the first category of modality, the possible is defined by Kant as “that which is in accordance with the formal conditions of experience.” These formal conditions of experience being given by space and time, it is impossible that I suddenly become a pure spirit or an angel, or that I have an unchanging intuition of eternal presence. I can move from one place to another, but I cannot be everywhere at the same moment. On the contrary, God, who is not submitted to the formal conditions of experience, is not potentially here or there, now and then; he is potentially and actually everywhere at once and the same time. The possible, thought as deprivation, a lack of form, or potentiality, is not in conformity with the notion of the supreme being. Kearney is right in stressing that the God of metaphysics is a pure actuality, \( \text{purus actus essendi} \) (a pure act of Being), as Thomas Aquinas puts it. As such, we agree that the possible cannot do justice to God, neither from the viewpoint of classical metaphysics, nor if it remains within the framework of the (metaphysical) first category of modality.

Now one might argue that, for the very same reason, actuality as a category should not benefit from a privilege to characterize God’s supreme nature. If God is simply actual, would he be deprived of possibility and of necessity? Would he be limited to the self-offering of his very presence and to an ontologically static sovereignty? Is actuality rich enough to express God’s infininity and transcendence? By criticizing the onto-theological conception of God, Kearney picks up on the same kind of objection against the exclusion of other qualifications.