



Chapter 11

The Subaltern Agenda of Martin Versfeld: The Ontological Argument from Below

Ryan Haecker 

Introduction: Subaltern Voices

The other is more than the abject pole of the one. For to think the other requires that we should think, not only of the one or the other, but also and essentially that which is shared between both. Neither the one nor the other can fully explain how the one can stand in a relation to that which is not itself, nor, alternatively, how this other can stand in a reciprocal relation to that which is itself alone. Rather, every difference of the one to an other gestures beyond such relations to a third term, which embraces, not only the one or the other, but, rather and beyond both, the concrete universal that produces both particulars. The universal paradigms initially appear to descend in a cascading division of one universal into many particulars, and many particulars into one among many singular entities.¹ Yet, as had already been observed by Plato, a sheer vertical descent of the ideas could not be dialectically sustained: for if the elevation of this third term to a higher universal must arise from a particular relation of one to the other, and this relation is more than what can be analysed from the one, then we must also acknowledge the essential role of the other that erupts from below.²

In the history of logic, this other from below has been named the “subaltern.” The subaltern can be formally defined as a specific mode of negation, in which some particular negates

1 Plato, *Phaedo*, 100a–d; *Republic*, 503b, 505a, 511b–c.

2 Plato, *Parmenides*, 130a–134e.

some other (alter-) particular (sub-ordinate) under the superior universal that is the same as itself. It is the inverse corollary of the grammar of paradigms: for as soon as such a universal and perfect exemplar of all predicates is elevated above many subordinate and particular instances, the difference of the same from the other, and of the universal from the particular, can be translated to express the negation of the particular that stands opposed to an other particular under this self-same universal. Hence, in Aristotle's *On Interpretation*, and later in Boethius' *Square of Opposition*, the subaltern expresses this negation of the subcontraries "Some S are P" and "Some S are not P."³ Since, from Parmenides to Hegel, the unity of being has been absolutely presupposed to stand above the division of the multiple, the particular, and the different, this subaltern negation has – with rare exceptions – tended to be relegated to an abject pole of conceptual opposition in and against the concrete universal.

In Post-Colonial Theory, the word "subaltern" has come to be used as a grammatical marker of a class of people who stand in a relation of particular alterity to the universalising power of colonial nations and imperial capitalism.⁴ Following the "Linguistic Turn" of Wittgenstein, Gadamer, and Derrida against totalising reason, grammar has again been acknowledged to carry a wealth of conceptual significance.⁵ The reflection, in Hegel, of negativity as an essential moment of conceptual

3 Aristotle, *On Interpretation*, 6–7; *Prior Analytics*, I.2, 25a.1–25; Boethius: *On Aristotle on Interpretation* 4–6, ed. Richard Sorabji, trans. Andrew Smith (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 263.14–269.16., 21–24.

4 See Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 2005); Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: An Introduction* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1998); Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (London: Blackwell, 2001); Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman eds., *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994).

5 See Richard Rorty, ed. *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1967); Michael Losonsky, *Linguistic Turns in Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

production⁶, like the galvanisation, in Marx, of the labour of the working-class as a pivot of class-struggle⁷, has, in Antonio Gramsci, been reconstituted as the social basis for the institution of a counter-hegemony of anti-imperial resistance.⁸ In Jacques Derrida's reflections on Hegel and Marx, this unsublatable excess has been rendered from the margins as a quasi-transcendental marker of revolutionary potential.⁹ From these currents, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has influentially cast the subaltern as the pivotal site of resistance against the cultural hegemony of imperial domination.¹⁰

More than perhaps any other nation, South Africa has been both condemned and celebrated as the geographic pivot of the subaltern. Founded at Cape Town as a coastal port along the southerly trade route from Western and Northern Europe to the East Indies, it has since been settled by Portuguese, Dutch, and

-
- 6 See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, trans. T.F. Geraets, W.A. Suchting, & H.S. Harris (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. 1991), §§112–114, 175–179; *The Science of Logic*, trans. George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 351–353.
- 7 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*, Volume 1, ed. Frederick Engels, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Swan Sonnenschein, Lowrey, & Co, 1887), see esp. Part III, Ch. VII, 156–178.
- 8 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 506–507, 765–766.
- 9 Jacques Derrida, “The Pit and the Pyramid: Introduction to Hegel’s Semiology,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), 69–108; *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 38–41, 47, 64; *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 48–9, 61–3, 75; Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 146–81.
- 10 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 271–313; Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds. *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Rosalind C. Morris, *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010).

English settlers, before the anti-colonialist political convulsions of the twentieth century. At the southern tip of the most southerly part of the Eurasian world-island, it looks back from the utmost South upon the global North. Yet, as a result of this most particular reflection upon the universal hegemony of power that ranges across the world, it can also serve as a unique mirror to reflect upon the many submerged pathways of philosophical modernity – from a new land, and for new ideas.

Like a prophet crying from the subaltern, Martin Versfeld speaks of how God can be known from the depths of the real, and with the songs of holy souls. With striking parallels to Martin Heidegger, Versfeld offers new romantic answers to the twin modern challenges of scepticism and idealism. Since then, he warns, “Descartes has perched like a ghoul upon the corpse of metaphysics, which is also the corpse of Western civilization.”¹¹ He chooses instead to speak from the standpoint of experience, but for the purpose, not of remaining within the ambit of the subject, but rather, of discovering a more originary escape to begin again from a higher principle. In speaking from the subject, and searching for the object, his works take flight from the subaltern to restore the universal.

Along with Jacques Maritain and Étienne Gilson, his works can initially be situated within the tradition of Neo-Thomism originating from the Italian Neoscholastic reaction against French Cartesian epistemology in general, and German Idealism in particular.¹² Versfeld’s writings are, however, notably distinguished by a strikingly generous openness to wrestling with the current questions of philosophy. He wrote: “We come nowhere being near right, since we have the answers.”¹³ For

11 Martin Versfeld, *The Perennial Order* (New York, NY: St Paul Publications, 1954), 19.

12 Joseph Kleutgen S.J., *Die Theologie der Vorzeit* (3 Vols., Münster, 1853–60, 5 Vols. 1867–74); *Die Philosophie der Vorzeit* (2 vols., Münster, 1860–3; Innsbruck, 1878); *Pre-Modern Philosophy Defended*, trans. William H. Marshner (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine Press, 2019). See Romanus Cessario, O.P., *A Short History of Thomism* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005).

13 Martin Versfeld, *St. Augustine’s Confessions and City of God* (Cape Town: Carrefour, 1990), 18.

“to be a Christian cannot possibly mean to conform to a type or to coincide with the paradigm case. And if you are asked by anybody with such an idea in the back of his mind, whether you are a Christian, it is intensely embarrassing. You may say no, not because you are Judas, but because you are trying not to be.”¹⁴ It is struggling with these more embarrassing questions, rather than with an assemblage of ready-made answers, that holds the promise to discover that which saves.

More than a thinker of simply one nation, Versfeld holds together two apparently conflicting trajectories of thought: on the one hand, he recovers from before the Cartesian shift to Modern scepticism, the “perennialist” tradition from Lao-Tzu to Thomas Aquinas; and on the other hand, he recommends a post-Heideggerian openness to its critical subversion. With the former trajectory, he is cosmopolitan, while with the latter, he is a perennial critic of postmodern nihilism. Against, however, any simplistic characterisation as a “medievalist,” Versfeld acknowledges that “we can’t go back in history,” except as “we are always going back to the past for spiritual nourishment,” and can, perhaps, most of all discover the sources of that nourishment in Plato, and the “great days of Athens.”¹⁵ His classical philosophical inclinations – increasingly of a Catholic tenor – came to be expressed in one voice with his political opposition to “Christian Nationalism” from Christo-fascism to South African apartheid. And his engagement with the political Left would later manifest in a more felicitous celebration of the secular as the “miraculous” self-abnegation of Christian dominion.¹⁶

This recollection of the “Perennial Order” calls for a critical interrogation of the causes of forgetting the particular. As the negation of the “all,” the particular is a way of judging “some” of what there is. It is an essential moment in the inner division and analysis of the syllogism in scientific knowledge. Yet it has

14 Martin Versfeld, *Our Selves* (Cape Town, Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1974/2010), 111.

15 Martin Versfeld, “Descartes and Me: Truth and Things,” in *Sum: Selected Works / 'n Keur uit sy werke* (Cape Town: Carrefour, 1991), 20.

16 Martin Versfeld, *Food for Thought: A Philosopher’s Cook-Book* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1983), 89.

tended to be forgotten in totalising philosophies of transcendent domination or of immanent emancipation, except that in each such a subordinate movement of the other from below continues to be preserved in the truth of the particular. This is as evident in logic as in metaphysics, where, expressly in the Ontological Argument for the existence of God, the “supreme being” is elevated above all particular beings as the greatest that can be thought. From Anselm to Hegel, the Ontological Argument – from the absolute idea of God in the self-surpassing of its contingency – tends to suppress the truth of the more substantial and real particular, except virtually as it must be surpassed by the recycling of its content that is already contained in the inescapable circuit of its logical operations.

This contested legacy of the “subaltern” now calls for a critical theological investigation. Although the word had been recoined by Gramsci, Derrida, and Spivak in protest to a totalisation of logic that refuses its emancipatory potential, the formal character of the subaltern can be more precisely interrogated by exploring the role of the particular other of judgement. In this essay, I will argue: first, Versfeld collects its truth from a circle of particulars; second, he suspends direct knowledge of the highest idea of God to authorise a subaltern ascent from the particular; and yet third, if all arguments for God can be analysed into the Ontological Argument, then Versfeld’s subaltern ascent can be recalled to pivot under the particular to preserve the incarnational and iconic truth of existence. His style can thus be explored as a “subaltern logic,” in which the essence of the syllogism is less the middle term, and more the subordinate alterity of judgement that calls upon a particular understanding of the real that cannot be so easily captured under the dominion of scientific certainty. With a prophetic voice that cries from below of the highest idea, Versfeld can still be read to have preserved the enduring ground of the particular, the subaltern, and the national perspective of South Africa. As Versfeld had written his dissertation on the Italian Hegelian Benedetto Croce, of “whose thought,” he claims, he “remember[s] nothing at all,” we can, though shorter, stand upon the shoulders of giants to

see from below further beyond these suspended alternatives of modern thought.¹⁷

The Perennial Order

Of all his works, *The Perennial Order* represents the crowning synthesis of Martin Versfeld's thought. The ambition of this book is nothing less than to recover from among the debris of modern philosophy the scattered pieces of a Christian *speculum mentis*, a mirror of the mind, so as to allow readers to ascend in spiralling reflection from the simplest elements to the highest idea of Christian theology.¹⁸ The first section investigates the simplest "Object of Philosophy," as the "primary datum" from which to discover the highest idea of the "supreme and necessary" being.¹⁹ The object of philosophy is "that which is," of being, in its "truth."²⁰ The "fundamental sanity of Greek metaphysics lies," he writes, "in its conviction that it is a body of truth revealing the nature of that which is."²¹

Christian theology is upheld as the sovereign "Queen of the Sciences." Yet "neither Plato nor Aristotle" had, Versfeld argues, "succeeded in stating the problem of philosophy in its purity."²² This "ultimate problem" is, as Leibniz stated, "not the problem of why things should be so disposed as they are, but why there should be any thing at all," in short, the question of existence.²³ In privileging existence over essence, modern philosophy has largely tended to hold "reality [to be] prior to logic," in a meta-logical reserve that stands prior to logical analysis.²⁴ This trajectory has culminated in the logic of Hegel, for whom, he contends, "rationalism is a pretension of divinity."²⁵ Such a philosophy of "essence," that will "have to do with essences," results,

17 Versfeld, "Descartes and Me: Truth and Things," 13.

18 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 53–54, 247.

19 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 9–38, esp. 10, 23.

20 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 9.

21 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 9.

22 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 9.

23 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 10.

24 Martin Versfeld, "Talking Metaphysics," in M. Versfeld and R. Meyer, *On Metaphysics* (Pretoria: Unisa, 1966), 10.

25 Martin Versfeld, "Talking Metaphysics," 8.

he indicates, from an assimilation of the conscious subject of philosophical inquiry into the suggestive aspect of the object, in which the subject “is itself included in the independent reality which is the object of thought.”²⁶ Following Schelling’s critique of Hegel,²⁷ he elevates the act of being (*actus essendi*) beyond the conceptual ground of essence. Since, for Versfeld, existence cannot be simply reduced to essence, there can, it seems, be no complete system of the knowledge of “being from nothing” that begins without presuppositions.²⁸ The beginning of what can be thought must rather be found in the receipt of existence, and the line of philosophical speculation that takes flight in search of this higher ground.²⁹

By contrast, the Cartesian “Cogito” is the singular reflection upon the subject, which, in its simple reflexivity upon thought, thinks nothing but itself, and ultimately nothing at all. Where, for Descartes, the clear and distinct ideas provide a transparent certainty of the object in and for the subject, for Saint Augustine, the expression “*factus eram ipse mihi magna question*” (I became a great puzzle to myself), acknowledges the objective depths that await to be discovered in the interior chambers of the soul.³⁰ Already here, “we are,” Versfeld writes, “an anonymous epistemological subject, interchangeable with any other,” and “on our way to the eternal substance of Spinoza, and the impersonal spirit of Hegel,” from which “Kierkegaard was to revolt.”³¹ Echoing Kierkegaard, the “incompleteness” of an objective science rests upon the subject’s interrogation of the being that is its own being for itself, or “self-knowledge.” Versfeld writes: “The incompleteness of the sciences rests upon

26 Martin Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 9.

27 See Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, “The Difference between Negative and Positive Philosophy,” in *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy: The Berlin Lectures*, trans. Bruce Matthews (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 141–154. See Stephen Houlgate, “Schelling’s Critique of Hegel’s ‘Science of Logic’.”—” *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (September 1999), 99–128; John Laughland, *Schelling Versus Hegel: From German Idealism to Christian Metaphysics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

28 Martin Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 10.

29 Martin Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 9.

30 Martin Versfeld, “Descartes and Me: Truth and Things,” 15.

31 Martin Versfeld, “Descartes and Me: Truth and Things,” 15.

the incompleteness of our self-knowledge.”³² Yet, in a way that is reminiscent of Heidegger’s critique of Husserl, it is “something which snowballs” from one time to the next in time and in history,” as it is “essentially a historical discipline,” such that, in reflecting on its roots, and searching for its eternal source, it stands open to receive this present moment as a gift of existence.³³

In a *Ressourcement* leap over the critical aporiae of modern philosophy, Versfeld calls for a Neo-Thomistic supersession of the anti-realist trajectory of post-Cartesian idealism. He protests that the Cartesian belief in the “natural light” of reason has led to a loss of “the radical historical conditioning of social reality,” and, consequently, led us to “end up in a relativism which makes one a hopeless sceptic.”³⁴ A question once asked of the entire world must be answered for oneself by creating that world anew. This scepticism had been capriciously withheld from destroying the ground of the subject. For “he had doubted whether the things of sense exist, and left himself with an ideal world between which and existence *ut exercita* that was a gap.”³⁵

“The source,” Versfeld writes, “of modern rationalism is the cogito.”³⁶ From this “abscission” of Descartes’ *Cogito* there arose “the primacy given to theory of knowledge in modern philosophical systems,” and the evacuation of the historicity of existence. Following this evacuation, Versfeld recounts: “I came to comprehend [with the realism of Saint Thomas] what metaphysics really was, and to comprehend how and for what motives Descartes and Kant had destroyed metaphysics.³⁷ For, in assimilating the ground of existence to the transcendental determinacy of essence, there remains no depth of hidden meaning that awaits to be discovered.” “I turned,” he writes, “from a philosophy of clear and distinct ideas to one of existential acts for which nature and man once more became a mystery” of “man’s radical questionability.”³⁸ The soul is, in this strange way,

32 Martin Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 19.

33 Martin Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 19.

34 Martin Versfeld, “Descartes and Me: Truth and Things,” 18.

35 Martin Versfeld, “Descartes and Me: Truth and Things,” 18.

36 Martin Versfeld, “Descartes and Me: Truth and Things,” 22.

37 Martin Versfeld, “Descartes and Me: Truth and Things,” 22.

38 Martin Versfeld, “Descartes and Me: Truth and Things,” 22.

as hidden and mysterious as our bodies, as each are gifts of God who is manifest in creation.

A torrent of anti-metaphysical currents has since cascaded from this initial irruption of unrestricted scepticism.³⁹ This reversal of “fundamental realism” has been held in the suspension of the object, and paradoxically to the re-objectivisation of the subject, in an absolutised correlation of thought and being.⁴⁰ “The pantheism of Spinoza is,” he narrates, “the point to which Cartesianism must logically lead,” and , in this absolute correlation, there is “the identification of God with nature.”⁴¹ Yet From this counterfeit identification of “God with nature,” we “arrive, by way of the rationalist evolutionism in Hegel, at the materialist evolution of Marx,” as ultimately in modern atheism that threatens to destroy its absolute and abiding ground of truth.⁴²

With an invocation of hyperbolic dynamism, the “world of finite things [remains] in a state of constant interaction.” For, in contrast to static essence, it consists of things that are “acted upon,”⁴³ the “mirror of others,”⁴⁴ and “revealed in experience.”⁴⁵ As in Heraclitus, he writes: “Movement implies not merely the falling short of being of anything of any cross-section of its history but of a lack of actuality in its history taken as a whole.”⁴⁶ The originary question of philosophy, of “why there is something rather than nothing,” is thus initially transposed to the question of “the origin and change or movement,” that is, of the absolute contingency of movement.⁴⁷ Since, however, time “involves the inadequacy of things to themselves,”⁴⁸ he answers that “motion cannot be the object of philosophy.”⁴⁹ The “final object of philosophy” cannot be held to “terminate in the empirical

39 Martin Versfeld, “Descartes and Me: Truth and Things,” 18.

40 Martin Versfeld, “Descartes and Me: Truth and Things,” 19.

41 Martin Versfeld, “Descartes and Me: Truth and Things,” 19.

42 Martin Versfeld, “Descartes and Me: Truth and Things,” 19.

43 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 13.

44 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 14.

45 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 15.

46 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 17.

47 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 17.

48 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 17.

49 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 18.

world,” but rather it must “take it according to its own standard,” the standard of its truth, or “leave it alone.”⁵⁰

With this critique of Neo-Kantian and Positivistic philosophies of finitude, Versfeld turns from the “reflexive activity” of the *Cogito Ergo Sum* to the singular ground of the *Esse Aliquid* to revive the “corpse of Western metaphysics.”⁵¹ To exist is to be in a singular way. For if common being is a transcendental, and universal predicate, existence is the being of “some thing” (*esse aliquid*), such that what makes something a “thing” (*res*) is that it is constituted from the singular ground of universal predication. He argues, against all varieties of Cartesian and Kantian epistemological reductions, that, if “there must be the experience” of thought, “it is impossible to think away the act of existence.”⁵² Existence is, he contends, no mere illusion, but, on the contrary, the indubitable ground from which any such illusion can appear: “We may dream that we dreamt, but at some point dreaming implies a waking world.”⁵³ In a way reminiscent of Gilson, he promotes the Neo-Thomistic metaphysical primacy of the act of being (*actus essendi*) over any conception of common being (*ens commune*). For the “awareness of existence” is, as he writes, the “primary datum of experience.”⁵⁴

With this higher criticism, he raises the question, not only of the reality of the illusion, but also of this very sceptical movement of doubt. Versfeld denies that this question of being *qua* being in metaphysics can be reduced to a generic concept (*ens communes*) of a univocal designation of beings (*univocatio entis*).⁵⁵ Rather, being is the subject that questions the object that is more absolutely unquestioned. As the object is also a subject, “it is,” he writes, “not we who are to judge metaphysics, is not we who question being but being which questions us.”⁵⁶ The being of the world, as of God, raises, in us, the question of being, as of one’s own being. There can, accordingly, be no “outside”

50 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 19.

51 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 19.

52 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 10.

53 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 10.

54 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 10.

55 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 9.

56 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 9.

of metaphysics, as every approach to the question of being, as of God, is also an approach from inside the act of questioning one's own being. Being is not an object, but rather, as for Gilson, a reflection upon the act of being, which arises from within the indispensable standpoint of the subject.⁵⁷ Hence, there can be no objectified metaphysics, or "ontology," which is not, more essentially, also a questioning in one's own being as it stands absolutely before the creative source of being.⁵⁸

This maieutic questioning of being is an acknowledgement of openness to the other, of the difference of being, and of the particular negation of the universal, or of the subordinate alterity, or the subaltern, in which a particular alternative is held against to speak from below of what is above. To interrogate existence is thus to ascend from the subaltern to the universal of truth. It is "the love which constitutes our interest in the object known," and the love that calls the subject to know, as it is known in and by the object.⁵⁹ The call of metaphysics is this "love of truth rather than its possession," of love rather than mastery, for it is "desire to possess itself which spurs it on," as it "exists as a question about itself," "knows that it is not the answer to its question," and, from within this question, "seeks its own being qua ens," even as it is "aware that its adequation can never exhaust its own essence" – as "it always points beyond itself" as given to and from its source.⁶⁰ The particularity of existence thus points beyond all particular things to the hidden yet revelatory and creative source of being.

Any answer to this question would be false, except as it refers to a transcendent source. In "call[ing] in God only to confirm us in our own self-idolatry," Descartes has, Versfeld alleges, "set metaphysics back half a millennium."⁶¹ For in claiming to know, not only that he is, but what he is, Descartes claims "an identity of essence and existence, which St. Thomas had attributed only to God, for only God could be unquestioning

57 Versfeld, "Talking Metaphysics," 7.

58 Versfeld, "Talking Metaphysics," 9.

59 Versfeld, "Talking Metaphysics," 12.

60 Versfeld, "Talking Metaphysics," 17.

61 Versfeld, "Talking Metaphysics," 17.

self-intelligence.” He claims, in short, a knowledge of essence that would be the necessary ground from which to produce all that exists, and all that can be known of being. This absolute identity of essence and existence is held to have achieved its culmination in German Idealism. For in constructing a “spurious metaphysical pantheism of pure reason,” “Kant, and especially Hegel, represent the ultimates in this direction” of dissolving the ground of reality into “human ghosts which are their correlates” of “the world safe for abstractions.”⁶² “Hegel is the greatest of all the anti-metaphysicals.”⁶³ And yet, this is not the end of the story. For, as he also argues, “all entities, even books by anti-metaphysicals, are metaphysical.”⁶⁴

Beyond any transcendental reduction, the “starting point of philosophy” is, Versfeld writes, those “things which exist,” and yet “for whose existence a sufficient reason must be found” for them to exist.⁶⁵ Yet knowledge of its “sufficient reason” cannot be satisfactorily given in experience. For as any finite thing “both is and is not,”⁶⁶ in a “plurality” that “stand[s] in need of other things,”⁶⁷ its sufficient reason is, he suggests, not found evidently in the immediate expression of its sheer external act of existence. Rather, it reflects from this inner ground of its essence to the outer consequence that it should necessarily exist. And, in asking this higher question, it reflects from the chains of causation to the singular and sufficient ground, from which anything can exist at all.

The unknowability of God as *actus purus* is correlated, for Versfeld, with the unknowability of the soul, such that, our questioning of being is also a questioning of ourselves. “When,” he writes, “Augustine says that the essences of things remain unknown to us, he applies this to ourselves and to our own knowledge.”⁶⁸ As this questioning of our own being must precede any further determination of contingent acts of existence, “its

62 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 13.

63 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 13.

64 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 13.

65 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 11.

66 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 12.

67 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 13.

68 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 18.

essence remains unknown to us,” as “all our knowledge is human knowledge,” and, as such, “is rooted in a being who is an enigma to himself.”⁶⁹ As metaphysics is the “activity of asking questions about its own truth,” this questioning constitutes “the basis of the dianoetic sciences,” which “leads to a view of science as” “opening horizons.”⁷⁰ Since, therefore, “all science is based on self-knowledge,” and yet knowledge of the self is as mysterious as knowledge of God,” “truth is,” for Versfeld, “immanent,” even as it stands “always as a background,” “which can never be fully comprehended.” Although “nothing is more present to the mind itself” than the presence of being as shown in truth, “this presence is an imperfect presence,” which is “rooted in aspiration after a good,” the gift of the good, and the calling to discover within itself that source.⁷¹

Versfeld then calls for us to “bring the notion of metascience into closer connection with history.”⁷² As there can be no production of existence or being from nothing, there can also be no absolutely presuppositionless and autonomously productive science, or special science, whether of metaphysics or a logic, which can “render itself intelligible.”⁷³ Rather, the intelligibility of any “special science,” including that of logic, “is derivative from the intelligibility of the historical and social process,” of our social and political relations, and, as such, of our questioning “what we make of it will depend, in part, at any rate, upon our philosophy or theology of history.”⁷⁴ In contrast, however, to Giambattista Vico,⁷⁵ Versfeld argues that “[history] is nevertheless not the ultimate science, because history itself always impels us towards the meta-historical,” which is the questioning of the historical

69 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 18.

70 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 17.

71 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 18.

72 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 14.

73 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 16.

74 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 16.

75 Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1948), Section VI, Ch. I, Epitomes of Poetic History, 257–9. See A. Robert Camponigri, *Time and Idea: The Theory of History in Giambattista Vico* (Chicago, IL: Regnery, 1953); Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1976).

that “rise within the bosom of history itself,” and “lead the history,” through “a concern with historiography,” to ask the absolute questions of the “philosophy and theology of history,” such that, when “we look within ourselves,” we should find that “metaphysics seeks truth about truth.”⁷⁶

Lacking such a historical ground, Cartesian idealism also lacks a rich ground of social relations. Versfeld writes: “Cartesian thought is anti-metaphysical because it is anti-historical.”⁷⁷ He proposes, instead, a reversal of this Cartesian priority, in favour of a zetetic return to Augustine. “In Descartes, we go from doubt to certainty, in Augustine from scepticism to questioning.”⁷⁸ The historicity of consciousness results from this continuous reflexivity. For “there is,” he writes, “an evolution of self-consciousness, a never-ending confrontation of thought by itself,” as it “assimilates something in each confrontation with itself, which will become an intellectum to the intellectus,” like a “growing intelligence with its finger on the pulse of its own growth.”⁷⁹ Against the “Manualist” Thomists⁸⁰, Versfeld argues that it is precisely that “actus is becoming” that “must always keep the question open,” “both for itself and for the special sciences,” as it is “founded in human being itself.”⁸¹ From this human centred foundation, the canon of truth should, he argues, be humanly reconsidered.

In an expression that is pregnant with political significance, Versfeld compares the mechanical automation of metaphysics to “the broken-down machine of the Empire.”⁸² He associates this sovereign making of the concepts with the ontological production of the world in the history of European colonialism, and the surrender of oneself to a recognition of its disintegration. “One has

76 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 17.

77 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 19.

78 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 19.

79 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 19.

80 See, for example, Joseph Pohle, *Dogmatic Theology I–XII*, trans. Arthur Preuss (St. Louis, MO: Herder, 1916–18); and Cardinal Mercier, *A Manual of Modern Scholastic Philosophy*, Volume(s) I–II, trans. T.L. Parker and S.A. Parker (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co.: St. Louis: B. Herder, 1916).

81 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 19.

82 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 9.

to destroy metaphysics to make the world safe for imperialism.”⁸³ For the visible empire of the world is but the manifestation of the invisible hegemony in the realm of ideas, in which God has been cast as an idolatrous instrument of reason. “Metaphysics is,” he argues, “not a conceptual framework or a spectral dance of concepts, which we manipulate, but the objective unfolding of being in time, submissive to its own entity,” in a surrender to coming to know.⁸⁴ Against this “empire” of ideas, Versfeld affirms that “science” is “human science,” essentially human, for “its limits are the limits of human self-consciousness.”⁸⁵ The highest question of the whole of being is thus always a question of one’s own being, from within the interior sources of the self-conscious subject, and for the purposes of discovering being drawn back into a more substantial relation to the object.⁸⁶

Under these conditions of accelerating cybernetic production, Versfeld protests that “the sacramental mind is absent,” and “the liturgy [is] dismissed as parrot-repetition or idolatry.”⁸⁷ For “the havoc wrought by the Reformed doctrine of the Fall, and the destruction of analogical thinking” has resulted in the demolition of all relations, in a false naturalisation of the order of grace, as of divine power.⁸⁸ Hence, “indifference to God” has had the “inevitable consequence” of “disrespect for the human intellect,” which has been framed under an “instrumental view of the mind,” such that the operations of the intellect have been framed in a “positivistic social climate” which threatens to “trivialise grace by asking it to do that for which our natural faculties are sufficient.”⁸⁹ Yet, even in the midst of a world driven mad by power, we can, nevertheless, continue to search within ourselves for the springs of a more original and incorruptible knowledge. As Versfeld promises: “We shall have all sciences when we know ourselves even as we are known.”⁹⁰ The

83 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 20.

84 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 20.

85 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 11.

86 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 12.

87 Versfeld, “The Intellectual Apostolate of South Africa.” *Blackfriars* 28, No. 328 (July 1947): 306.

88 Versfeld, “The Intellectual Apostolate of South Africa,” 306.

89 Versfeld, “The Intellectual Apostolate of South Africa,” 308.

90 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 20.

“foundation of all ontology” is, accordingly, only “saved from idealism,” as from imperialism, “by the insight” of the human, as “an element in a life which makes itself only by finding itself” in a higher questioning of its own being.⁹¹

To Call upon God from Below

In the midst of these questions, Versfeld seeks to collect the truth of the highest idea from among a constellation of many particular things. His ascent, however, to this higher ground always inclines towards collapse, as, in every forward advance, it hurtles from one finite instance to the next, in a finite arc of ascending motion that can only ever stretch to without reaching the infinite. Hence, Versfeld argues that “the ontological argument makes the enormous claim that man can conceive the divine essence,” whether, for Descartes, in a transcendental argument for knowledge of the simple Augustinian divine essence, or for Spinoza, in an immanent dialectic of the absolute substance that is shown through all the modes of various extension. In each case, “the real has become rational,” because God has become, it seems to him, an idol of reason. Yet, “Cartesian philosophy,” Versfeld comments, “does something worse than deny God, it makes use of him.”⁹² For, in collapsing God into an absolute concept, God would be cast as an instrument of the computational universe. This shift to the subject, he argues, “had blindly borrowed a Christian God without the metaphysical apparatus which would enable them to distinguish act from action,” collapsed act into action or potency, and the ground of being into the totalising nihilistic flux of so many false and passing sensations.⁹³

From this abyss, we can turn backwards and search upwards for the highest idea. As, Versfeld writes, “our own reason reveals itself as not being itself its own sufficient reason,” “human reason ceases to be itself when it cannot go beyond itself,” except as it takes leave from the idealist enclosure reason apart from the real.⁹⁴ And it reflects from the ungrounded contingency to the

91 Versfeld, “Talking Metaphysics,” 20.

92 Versfeld, “Descartes and Me: Truth and Things,” 19.

93 Versfeld, “Descartes and Me: Truth and Things,” 20.

94 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 21.

principle necessity of “a being which contains all the reasons for its being in itself,” in which “existence must belong to its very essence,” that is, to the simple identity of essence and existence.⁹⁵ As the ground whose existence is essential, God “is its own sufficient reason,” a “sufficient reason,” and the “idea of a cause” that “is also the cause of itself,” that is, the absolute principle of all causes.⁹⁶ Although the empirical world has a “mode of being” “whose essence is not to exist,” we can discover among the effects within the world “an object more satisfying to the intellect than that which changes.”⁹⁷

Against those who would pretend to “pass directly” from this idea to God, Versfeld contends we can only come to such an idea from a reflection upon the particularity of existence as true.⁹⁸ For since, “my thought imposes no necessity on things,” an argument that leaps directly from the finite to the infinite can,” he argues, “be justly criticised for “excessive rationalism.”⁹⁹ Following St. Thomas Aquinas’ critique of Anselm of Canterbury, this idea is “necessary only in our mind.”¹⁰⁰ As such, it does not “possess a real and de facto existence.”¹⁰¹ Against Descartes’ suggestion of an innate idea of God, he argues, instead, that a sufficient reason must be *per se notum*, in which “the predicate is the same as the subject,” “not known by us per se,” but rather better known from the effects.¹⁰² Since, as for Malebranche, “God illumines” our intellect “without allowing Himself to be seen,” “the idea of being is not the idea of anything created, but is the idea of God himself.”¹⁰³

Knowledge of God must be reciprocally sustained by divine illumination, through which the mind reflects as in a mirror the divine light of every thought. Yet this divine illumination would

95 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 22.

96 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 23.

97 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 23–4.

98 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 23.

99 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 24–5.

100 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 25.

101 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 25.

102 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 26. See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, PP1.Q2.A1.

103 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 27.

“destroy the natural as opposed to the divine causality.”¹⁰⁴ For as the divine Light is the ocular manifestation in glory of the divine Word or *Logos*, and the natural reason of finite logic is assumed in to proceed luminously from its source, the subaltern particularity of finite existence must be utterly evacuated by such a more immediate knowledge of God. By contrast, Saint Thomas Aquinas has, for Versfeld, presented the standpoint of the subaltern particular as an essential moment in proofs of the existence of God. As a “finite creature,” “man is caught up or involved in the order of material things,” among particular things, and the “hierarchical order,” in which all such things come to be known.¹⁰⁵ As an “embodied mind”¹⁰⁶, “human knowledge must stand with the material things,” with sensible species, and with the subaltern particular.¹⁰⁷

After rejecting *a priori* arguments from above, Versfeld rather affirms a series of *a posteriori* arguments for God from below - from the particularity of sensation, and from the subaltern path of the particular. In line with the *Angelic Doctor*, Versfeld rejects *a priori* proofs of God, such as the Ontological Argument, and restricts proofs of God to *a posteriori* arguments, such as the Cosmological and Teleological Arguments. He writes: “There can, in fact, only be a proof *a posteriori* of the existence of a [supreme] Being.”¹⁰⁸ Since, however, “our intellect cannot proceed from sensible things to a vision of the divine essence,” we can, to the contrary, only “know that there is a God as the first cause of all things.”¹⁰⁹ This “transcendent caused relationship” is thus linked in a relationship of “analogical knowledge,” the natural from which the “supernatural irrupts,” as from this “life of grace” we can “dimly discern” the “excess of light.”¹¹⁰ His pivot from the universal to the particular is thus reciprocally sustained by a parallel reflection from the particular to the universal, which prepares a subaltern road of *a posteriori* arguments from below for

104 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 32.

105 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 33.

106 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 34.

107 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 35.

108 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 35.

109 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 37.

110 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 37–38.

the existence of God beyond every order of sensation. As a voice crying from the South, Versfeld's struggles to emancipate this particularity of existence from the universal determination in an absolute idea.

Of the classical arguments for the existence of God, the Ontological Argument is first and absolute, as it alone conceives of the highest idea of which nothing greater can be thought. All of the arguments for the existence of God can be analysed in and from the ground of this highest idea. As Immanuel Kant has argued, the Teleological Argument and the Cosmological arguments can be analysed in an argument against an infinite regress of causes from effects to the first and final causes, culminating in a first and final cause or principle of creation; and since the first and final cause of all effects stands absolutely beyond any diminution of greatness among the effects, the Cosmological and Teleological Arguments for God can also be analysed into the absolute Idea of God. In each of these latter and lesser arguments, thought reflects from the effects of motion to either its first beginning or its final end: either from the posited ground, or from the inferential conclusion, such that the mind arrives, on this ascending road of reflection, to the highest idea of the divine Intellect, which virtually contains all relative, partial, and lesser concepts, as it contemplates every argument in absolute knowing.

At this pivotal juncture, Versfeld's critique of the Ontological Argument can be recalled to recommend a subaltern way to search for knowledge of God that leaps from the particular ground of existence. For if, as Gaunilo of Marmoutiers' objection of the "Lost Island" suggests, the Ontological Argument virtually presupposes its own conclusion, the foremost challenge of this argument must be to demonstrate how such a circle of argument can be productive of novel consequences. As a finite series of arguments, it appears to presuppose its conclusions among its premises. Yet, as an infinite dialectical circuit, it can recycle its first posit in and for the production of novel consequences. Since, as in Descartes and Malebranche, thought should either infinitely reflect from images to ideas, or be circuitously sustained from above by divine illumination, yet either share in divine or start from human thought, the Ontological Argument would appear

to lead to either the excesses of “Ontologism,” holding God to be known from being, or “Rationalism,” that God can be known without the aid of supernatural revelation. Against these false alternatives, Versfeld attempts to, more radically, sustain the Catholic sense of the particular by speaking from below of the truth of existence.

The signature of Versfeld’s style has, in this way, been to speak from below with the submerged voice of Neo-Thomistic and Existentialist concern for the subaltern particular. The subaltern is, in Versfeld, not just an irruptive potential of post-colonial resentment, but rather, and more richly, a metaphysical exploration of the chthonic texture of that which exists. As existence recalls its origin, God can, accordingly, only be known from below, from an *a posteriori* analysis of the effects of motion to the originary cause of creation, that is, from the humble standpoint of the subaltern experience of existence. This subaltern style upholds the unanalysable fact of existence, as the “basic datum” of scientific knowledge. And it can discover in this fact the immediate trace of the oldest revelation. In reflecting from the particular to the universal, Versfeld more radically affirms its truth in existence, and existence as true. In contrast to post-Cartesian reductions of the real, Versfeld assumes this zetetic questioning of our ways of knowing into the revelatory ground of existence.

Existence is the key to theology. For, as Versfeld contends, the idea of God can only be approached from below, as knowledge of its existence opens from the most general science of the increasingly specialised and existential sciences, all of which, at last, culminates in a leap of faith from the circle of its particular irruptions to and from the idea upon which it pivots to proceed. Setting aside suspicions of “ontotheology,” he affirms “the essence of the Christian God is being,” for “God is being, supreme and necessary,” as “His existence lies entirely within Himself, and therefore the reason for all contingent existence lies within Him.”¹¹¹ Since, finally, this movement ascends beyond all lesser, incoherent, and diminished ideas of God, to the greatest idea

111 Versfeld, *The Perennial Order*, 23.

of which nothing greater can be thought, this conflict of the Ontological Argument can at last be collected into the highest idea. The subaltern approach, from the particular to the universal, is thus, not a suspension of, but more ultimately, a way from below to knowledge of God that opens from among the subordinate other.

At the summit of this subaltern ascent, we can acknowledge, in Versfeld, an iconic gesture to the revelatory facticity of existence as the nova of truth. In contrast to post-Cartesian suspensions of the world, from the concept, he calls any and all views of the world to answer to the most originary question of its contingent and creative source. In the inspiration of Maritain, Gilson and the Existential Thomists, the question of existence thus comes before that of being and nothing. And, in decisive contrast to Heidegger and Sartre, the truth of existence, for Versfeld, is not simply a choice of one's own being before the abyssal finality of the nothing, but rather, as in the less explored paths of late Schelling and the Russian Sophiologists, the call to reflect from the revelatory traces of effects in motion to the creator of every act of existence.¹¹² This subaltern ascent is thus eternally sustained by the generation of the particular, the creation of the world, and the begetting of its creative voice. From beginning to end, the truth of the particular is absolutely the procession of God from God, in whom the highest idea has opened to give entirely of itself in each living spark of experience.

112 See Sergei Bulgakov, *Sophia, the Wisdom of God: An Outline of Sophiology* (Library of Russian Philosophy, Lindisfarne Books, 1993); Mikhail Sergeev, *Sophiology in Russian Orthodoxy: Solov'ev, Bulgakov, Losskii, Berdiaev* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2007); Marcus Plested, *Wisdom in Christian Tradition: The Patristic Roots of Modern Russian Sophiology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).