

William Haggerty

On Not Taking the World for Granted: E. L. Mascall on The Five Ways

Considered one of the leading proponents of natural theology in the 20th century, Eric Lionel Mascall (1905–1993) taught philosophy and theology at King’s College London for most of his career. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he insisted that classical theism, embodied in the writings of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, could be successfully revived for a modern audience. Known for his vigorous defense of neo-Thomism, Mascall offered an unusual interpretation of *The Five Ways*. While modern scholastics typically read the proofs as syllogistic exercises, Mascall maintained that God’s existence could not be deduced, but must be grasped by way of a unique type of metaphysical intuition. In my paper, I want to re-examine his position, explore his reasons for adopting it, and raise several questions concerning its significance for the history of neo-Thomism.

Let us take a closer look at his position. In his initial remarks, Mascall suggests that each of the *Ways* can be represented by a simple *modus ponens* argument. Thus, for example, his version of the *Third Way*, stripped of its complexity, can be reduced to the following syllogism:

William Haggerty — Gannon University, Erie, Pa., USA
e-mail: HAGGERTY002@gannon.edu • ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5834-7790>

If there exists a contingent being, there must exist a Necessary Being. But there do exist contingent beings. Therefore, there exists a Necessary Being.¹

Mascall believes that the challenge here does not lie in showing how the conclusion follows from the premises, but rather in establishing the truth of the major premise. He does not see how this can be done without “begging the conclusion.”² Why does he think so? He explains that the major premise depends upon the truth of the minor premise—the claim that there exist contingent beings. Yet if this is the case, if the major ultimately rests upon a grasp of contingency, it cannot be known through any discursive method but must be sought through a careful examination of finite beings themselves. However, once one comes to recognize in experience that a finite being does not provide for its own existence (that it is a contingent being), the major premise and the conclusion follow directly. While it is true that one may formalize this process in an argument, Mascall maintains that the proof is simply the explicitation or unpacking of an apprehension. Thomas presents this transition in syllogistic terms but, inasmuch as he is concerned with “ontological relations” rather than “logical relations,” the *Ways* do not require familiarity with the rules of logic so much as a closer inspection of finite being.³ In the end, the existence of God cannot be derived from premises; it must be grasped in a “cognitive act.”⁴

¹ E. L. Mascall, *Existence and Analogy: A Sequel to “He Who Is”* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1949), 67. I am grateful to Professor David A. Nordquest of the Philosophy Department at Gannon University for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

² E. L. Mascall, *Words and Images: A Study in Theological Discourse* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1957), 84.

³ E. L. Mascall, *He Who Is: A Study in Traditional Theism* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1943), 73.

⁴ Mascall, *Existence and Analogy*, 80.

In a later work, Mascall links his position to a central tenet of Thomas's metaphysics. The *Ways* illustrate what he considers the "fundamental characteristic" of finite being—its "inability to account for its own existence."⁵ This inability, technically expressed in the real distinction between essence and existence, remains the sole "datum" underlying all of the proofs.⁶ For Mascall, two basic features comprise the makeup of any particular being: its "concrete existence" and its evident "contingency." Its "concrete existence" expresses its "ontological self-centeredness"—a finite being is always grasped as a "something in itself."⁷ But though it is true that every such being retains this "core of impenetrability," Mascall notes, it does not seem to possess in its nature "any reason why it should exist at all"—it remains something which "might not and need not have been."⁸ The recognition of contingency is central here: the presence of a being whose existence is not "self-maintained" but "received from without," reveals by its metaphysical composition the "creative activity" of God.⁹

Mascall is quick to distance his position from any kind of ontologism. In this experience, one does not perceive God immediately, but only acknowledges the fact of His existence. Since what is grasped is "the presence of a cause in the perceived effect," the apprehension has a sort of mediated immediacy: one's perception is direct, inasmuch as God is discovered in experience, but it is mediated, inasmuch as it is only through an encounter with finite beings that one can reach the Infinite.¹⁰ In such an effort, the intellect does not merely record the be-

⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁷ E. L. Mascall, *The Openness of Being: Natural Theology Today* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1971), 109.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 109–110.

⁹ Mascall, *Existence and Analogy*, 71, 78.

¹⁰ Mascall, *Words and Images*, 85.

ing's "bare particularity" in existing; rather, by penetrating to the core of its nature, it seizes on the very cause "whereon (its) finitude rests."¹¹ To avoid confusion, Mascall borrows a term from the Augustinian tradition by way of St. Bonaventure—calling the act a *contuitus* or contuition.¹²

In making his case, Mascall often cites the work of two colleagues who held similar positions. According to Mark Pontifex and Austin Farrer, because God is contained in the concept by which we know finite beings, there is no need to establish His existence by formal argument. For Pontifex, what one actually apprehends in finite being is the "double concept" of "effect-implicating-cause"—since the "being" and its "source" always appear together as "foreground" to "background" in our knowledge, any attempt to separate or "isolate" them is self-defeating.¹³ Similarly, Farrer contends that God must be found within what he calls the "cosmological relation," a unique cognitive act in which one apprehends not "the-creature-without-God or God-without-the-creature" but "the creature-deriving-being-from-God and God-

¹¹ Mascall, *He Who Is*, 73–74.

¹² Mascall, *Words and Images*, 85. In a footnote, Mascall does not directly refer to the medieval theologian, but cites the study *Medieval Mystical Tradition and Saint John of the Cross*, by a Benedictine of Stanbrook Abbey (London: Burns and Oates, 1954), 70. However, Professor H. P. Owen, who later defended Mascall's position in his *The Christian Knowledge of God* (London: The Athlone Press, 1969), claimed that the term originated with the work of Bonaventure. In writing of the notion of contuition, he quotes from Etienne Gilson's *The Philosophy of St. Bonaventure* (Patterson: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1965), 400–401: "This indirect apprehension by thought of an object which itself eludes us, the presence of which is in some way implied in that of the effects which follow from it, receives the name *contuitus* in St. Bonaventure's teaching. Intuition is just the direct vision of God which is refused us; 'contuition', in the proper sense, is only the apprehension in a perceived result of the presence of a cause which we cannot discover intuitively . . ."

¹³ Mascall, *Existence and Analogy*, 68. Mascall here cites Pontifex's brief study, *The Existence of God* (London: Longmans, 1947), which offers a position similar to his own.

as-the-creative-ground-of-the-creature: God-and-the-creature-in-the-cosmological-relation.”¹⁴

Mascall admits that, considered strictly as proofs, the *Ways* appear circular. What then is the point of argument if it does not lead to God’s existence? He thinks there is a two-fold purpose: since Thomas seeks to “induce and defend the contuition of God in finite beings,” argumentation is useful both before and after the apprehension has taken place.¹⁵ The proofs no doubt help prepare the mind: though it is possible to grasp “in a flash” the contingency of being, usually the contuitive power requires some “interior or exterior dialogue” to prompt it.¹⁶ Such dialogue compels the intellect to focus its attention; it establishes that “frame of mind in which the apprehension of finite beings in their dependence on God is possible.”¹⁷ The arguments also serve to defend the apprehension after it has taken place by showing that it is not an unreasonable experience, and that it should never be “dismissed as an illusion.”¹⁸

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Why does Mascall willingly adopt a position that most Thomists would consider unconventional, if not downright unorthodox? I think there are two separate grounds for his reading: the first is textual in nature; the second goes to the heart of his understanding of Thomism. Let us first examine the textual problem which consists of two issues familiar to students of the *Ways*. The first issue has to do with the interrelation or—better yet—the unity of the proofs. Thomas apparently assumes that all of the *Ways* conclude to the same Being, but there is

¹⁴ Mascall, *Words and Images*, 85. Mascall was impressed with Farrer’s brilliant examination of this problem in his *Finite and Infinite* (London: Dacre Press, 1943).

¹⁵ Mascall, *He Who Is*, 73.

¹⁶ Mascall, *The Openness of Being*, 111.

¹⁷ Mascall, *Existence and Analogy*, 90.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.

the possibility, as some critics suggest, that they actually result in five different beings, a “kind of celestial committee.”¹⁹ Where is the evidence, Mascall asks, that all of the arguments lead to the same God?

The second issue concerns Thomas’s use of the regress formula, a topic Mascall addresses in connection with the *First Way*. He begins by calling into question a possible interpretation of this formula which he believes represents a fundamental misunderstanding of Thomas’s argument. According to this reading, in rejecting an infinite regress of moved movers, Thomas supposedly arrives at an unmoved Mover which, though first in a finite series, nonetheless remains a part of the series.²⁰ The conclusion here would suggest that, while God has an immediate impact on the second mover, He has but an indirect connection to subsequent movers. Mascall argues that such an interpretation conflicts with Thomas’s real intention: in using the phrase “non est producere infinitum,” he notes, the Angelic Doctor is not concerned so much with rejecting an infinite regress, but with showing that, even granting its possibility, such a series would still need a cause. In other words, the argument not only demands a mover to begin the series, it requires a creative cause that fully sustains it as a whole.²¹ The problem is that Thomas does not make this clear: the *First Way* might establish the existence of a Mover with a “radically different nature,” but it fails to make the case for the more vigorous account of divine causality found in the *Treatise on Creation*.²² And Mascall claims that the diffi-

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁰ Mascall, *Existence and Analogy*, 43–44. Mascall here criticizes a popular objection to the *First Way* which is based upon this reading of the regress formula. According to this objection, he notes, “we only arrive at a first mover which is itself a member of the series, and is therefore nothing like the Christian idea of God. It would bear the same relation to the other members of the series as the integer ‘one’ bears to the succeeding members of the series of integers, ‘two’, ‘three’ and the rest. Its status is essentially the same as theirs, except that it happens to have no predecessor.”

²¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

²² *Ibid.*

culty here lies with the inadequacy of the regress formula itself. In speaking of the *Second Way*, he notes:

It is of course perfectly true, as has often been pointed out, that all that is demonstrated is the impossibility of an infinite regress of *essentially* subordinated causes. . . . The fact remains that any argument based upon the notion of a regress can never prove more than that God acts at the beginning of the sequence, whether that sequence be a temporal sequence or not.²³

Mascall thinks his approach does much to resolve these two issues. When read in the traditional fashion, the *Ways* appear “incoherent with the rest of St. Thomas’s system.”²⁴ However, when they are viewed in the light of contuition, as dialogues focusing on characteristics which reveal the radical dependence of finite beings, their problems tend to disappear. Taken as distinct proofs, their interrelation is ambiguous because they appear to be derived from “five different kinds of act of inspection of finite being,” and thus conclude to “five different beings infinite in five different respects.”²⁵ Nevertheless, once one grants, along with Mascall, that the arguments are nothing but distinct “syllogizations” of one and the same contuitive act in which God is formally “implicated in it as First Mover, First Efficient Cause and all the rest,” they unquestionably find their unity and their termination in “one infinite being.”²⁶

Mascall also dismisses the problem of infinite regress, finding a solution in his reading of the *Fourth Way*. Thomas here affirms the degrees of perfection among finite beings not in order to arrange them into any dependent order, he notes, but to emphasize their common limitation in being. From this point, the proof establishes the existence

²³ *Ibid.*, 75–76.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

²⁵ Mascall, *He Who Is*, 78.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

of a cause “which possesses (the perfection) unconditionally.”²⁷ Mascall suggests that Thomas could easily have introduced a version of infinite regress here but chose not to do so. He speculates that his use of this argument in the first three ways was something of an “historical accident”: having inherited the formula from Aristotle, and being driven by apologetic concerns, the Angelic Doctor was eager to show that the proof “would lead not to the God of Aristotle but to the God of Christianity.”²⁸ However, despite being saddled with a defective regress formula, Mascall argues, Thomas can still accomplish his main task: because the *Ways* are not proofs but “discussions” meant to induce a *contuitio*, they need only establish the radical contingency of finite being.

But Mascall’s interest here does not turn on textual difficulties alone. What makes his reading so unique is his claim that *contuitio* lies at the heart of Thomas’s work. The key to his treatment is found in a distinction originally introduced by theologian Josef Pieper in his classic study *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*. Pieper there recalls that the great medieval teachers distinguished between a two-fold function of the human intellect—dividing understanding between *ratio* and *intellectus*. He explains:

The Middle Ages drew a distinction between the understanding as *ratio* and the understanding as *intellectus*. *Ratio* is the power of discursive, logical thought, of searching and of examination, of abstraction, of definition and drawing conclusions. *Intellectus*, on the other hand, is the name for the understanding in so far as it is the capacity of *simplex intuitus*, of that simple vision to which truth offers itself like a landscape to the eye.²⁹

²⁷ Mascall, *Existence and Analogy*, 77.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

²⁹ Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (New York: Mentor, 1964), 34.

Pieper adds that such thinkers accorded equal measure to each function, contending that the graceful coordination of *ratio* and *intellectus* was critical to every act of understanding. Now Mascall believes that this relation, so crucial to the medieval tradition, has been replaced in modernity by an unhealthy emphasis on *ratio*, one that has led to the impoverishment of Western thought.

Mascall's diagnosis of the problem begins with an examination of early modern thought which originated in the Cartesian effort to establish indubitable truth while avoiding error. To achieve this end, modern thinkers typically restricted the range and capacity of the intellect, demanding, in Mascall's words, that the mind "detach itself from its object, attend only to the object's sensible characteristics, and confine its own activities to observation and ratiocination."³⁰ These features describe the epistemological position of John Locke. By restricting the perceptual act to the "registration" of sense-images, Locke confined the intellect's role to a strictly discursive function, insisting that it could do no more than deduce, from the perceived sense qualities, "the existence of some inapprehensible substance."³¹ Inasmuch as the intellect had no share in perception, Locke reasoned, it could never apprehend or grasp the being directly; it operated solely as *ratio*, never as *intellectus*.

In sketching the history of British empiricism from Locke to Logical Positivism, Mascall finds throughout the same neglect of *intellectus* and the same Cartesian longing for "infallible knowledge."³² Whether the empiricist spoke of sense-images, sense-data or *sensibilia*, the goal always centered on the elusive quest for epistemically "safe" objects—that is, for "objects for whose nature we could not possibly be

³⁰ Mascall, *Words and Images*, 65.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

³² *Ibid.*, 67.

deceived.”³³ This requirement, and the corresponding drive for clear and distinct ideas, was actually a flight from the world which resulted in a divorce between perception and reality. By shrinking the perceptual act to sensation, the empiricist could no longer make any connection between the human intellect and “the world of cats and cabbages and human beings.”³⁴ And, given this tendency, it was not surprising that British philosophy eventually devolved into various forms of skepticism—a decline, Mascall notes, which was foreshadowed in the work of Locke: the inferential leap from the “perceived sensory object” to the existence of an inapprehensible “trans-sensory object” could never be more than an act of faith on the part of the knower. Moreover, by embracing the demand that the only genuine knowledge consists of clear and distinct ideas, the empiricists embraced a criterion that eliminated from their consideration any part of being that could not meet this standard. By thus stripping reality of significant value, they were left with an “emaciated and sterile” world; a world, Mascall notes,

in which depth has been sacrificed to clarity, and in which nothing has any inside, a world in which there are no questions left to answer, not because they have all been answered but because they have been condemned as being no questions at all.³⁵

By contrast, the medieval position, which Mascall associates with St. Thomas, differs from the modern view not only in its effort to balance *ratio* and *intellectus*, but also in its singular emphasis on the capacity of the human intellect to apprehend real beings. Whereas modern theory, with its stubborn reliance on *ratio*, emphasizes “detachment from the object,” and deliberately restricts its vision to the “sensible surface” of things, the “traditional view” encourages “involvement”—even sympathy—with its object and fosters a contemplative yearning to

³³ *Ibid.*, 66.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 75.

delve beneath the surface to uncover the “intelligible metaphysical being.”³⁶

Mascall claims that the difference between medievals and moderns on this issue arises from their distinct attitude to the perceptual act. Perception for the Lockean terminates in the sense-quality which is—to use the Scholastic phrase—the *objectum quod*, the direct object of the intellect. In the medieval account, the perceptual act begins in sensation, but it also possesses a “non-sensory component.” Against the claims of British empiricism, Thomas insists that sense-data, though vital to the knowing process, function primarily as the *objectum quo*, the means by which the intellect is able to grasp being. In his estimate, the principal act of intellection is not an inferential movement of *ratio*; rather, it is an act of *intellectus*, or “contemplative penetration,” in which, through the instrumentality of the senses, the intellect is able to apprehend the true “*objectum quod*, the intelligible trans-sensible being.”³⁷ Mascall confesses that, by stressing *intellectus* in this manner, Thomas tends to lower expectations with respect to knowledge. As we have seen, in their quest for epistemically safe objects, the empiricists amassed an arsenal of clear and distinct ideas, but since such knowledge only skimmed the surface, it eliminated from their consideration the world of real things. By affirming the capacity of *intellectus* to penetrate beneath the sense-data and thus reach the trans-sensible being of things, Thomas realizes that real beings possess an “inside,” and that—to the extent that this is so—one must learn to sacrifice clarity of vision for depth of understanding. Thus, while one can acquire genuine knowledge of real beings, it is a knowledge which always remains “ob-

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 70, 82.

scure and opaque,” because its object, the real world of “cats and cabbages and human beings,” is “essentially mysterious.”³⁸

It is because the world has this character of mystery that it is not a “problem” awaiting an answer, but an “object inviting contemplation.”³⁹ To solve the technical issues which plague modern science, Mascall notes, one need only call upon the “detached and dispassionate examination” of *ratio*.⁴⁰ When confronted with a mystery, however, one must adopt an “attitude of humble and wondering contemplation.”⁴¹ This act of wonder should not be confused with the systematic “wondering how” one associates with problem-solving and which often consists in listing “sensible qualities” and exploring “their relationships”; while such a limited technical approach does proceed from the given fact that finite beings exist, it never raises questions about that existence.⁴² On the contrary, the “act of contemplative penetration,” which is *contuitive* apprehension, is fundamentally an act of “wondering at finite beings themselves.”⁴³ Mascall stresses the limits of our vision here: as we search ever more deeply beneath “the phenomenal skin” of experience, first to apprehend the physical objects and persons that immediately surround us, and then to uncover the God who is the ontological ground for both, we recognize that, insofar as “in each case the object is a mystery,” our understanding must remain “correspondingly obscure.”⁴⁴

It is in light of this treatment of *intellectus* that we can appreciate Mascall’s preference for *contuition*. He suggests that his interpretation

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 78. Mascall’s treatment of the difference between “problems” and “mysteries” owes much to the work of Gabriel Marcel.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 80–81.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 82–83.

of the *Ways* complements Thomas's work in metaphysics, epistemology and psychology. First, his reading not only re-affirms the traditional emphasis on *intellectus*, it also shows how the modern reliance upon *ratio* diminishes the proofs. Despite all of his talk about the opacity of our intellectual vision, he claims that contuitive apprehension provides us with knowledge of God that is certain. The trouble with the Scholastic interpretation is that it agrees with the standard position outlined in British empiricism. By confining the intellect's function to *ratio*, the empiricists rejected the possibility of acquiring any sure knowledge of being; the mind, restricted to sense-images, can only infer the "existence of some inapprehensible substance" from its data.⁴⁵ But any such movement of reason, isolated from the power of *intellectus*, rests on little more than a "probability," a "pure leap in the dark": if the intellect has no genuine knowledge of the *objectum quod*, there is no objective ground for its operation.⁴⁶ When the *Ways* are read in this fashion, they suffer the same fate as any Lockean inference, and thus represent an empty exercise in "discursive ratiocination" by which one formally assents to the proposition that "God exists." Mascall considers this process a poor substitute for the surety found in the contemplative "recognition of God"; as prompts for contuition, the *Ways* do not trade in probabilities, nor do they require an inferential leap of any kind, grounded as they are in the ability of *intellectus* to grasp the nature of finite being.⁴⁷

Secondly, Mascall suggests that his approach, by embracing the demands of Thomas's realism, helps restore the integrity of the perceptual act, something that had been abandoned in the British tradition. He recognizes that, for St. Thomas, it is neither the "intellect that knows" nor the "sense that senses," but the whole person who understands

⁴⁵ Mascall, *He Who Is*, 75.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

through the intellect and perceives through the senses.⁴⁸ Because there is one percipient, there is but one perceptual act in which the person reaches “the actually existing extra-subjective being.”⁴⁹ In this account, the full understanding of any being requires both operations of the intellect—conceptualizing and judging—but each of these acts in turn demands the contribution of the senses which make known both “the particularity and the existence” of sensible things.⁵⁰ And if, by means of this graceful coordination of sense and intellect, one not only apprehends the essence and existence of finite being, but also reaches its causal source, there is little need for *ratio* or argumentation. Now Thomas’s treatment of this relation—which Mascall calls the “unity of the perceptual act”—is precisely what is missing from modern empiricism.⁵¹ Because perception for the Lockean involves “two successive acts” which are only loosely connected, there can be no genuine interaction between sense and intellect, for even if the senses could provide an *objectum quo*, the intellect, conceived as pure *ratio*, lacks any power to see or “read” within such sense-data the *objectum quod* or “inner essence of things.”⁵²

Thirdly, Mascall thinks his interpretation reveals the “radically existential nature of St. Thomas’s thought.”⁵³ By installing the real distinction as the central datum underlying the proofs, he aligns himself with the existential Thomism of Etienne Gilson. According to Gilson, in purging Aristotelian thought of its essentialism, Thomas “transformed” Greek metaphysics by giving priority to the *esse-essentia* dis-

⁴⁸ Mascall, *Existence and Analogy*, 56.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 53.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 79.

tion.⁵⁴ Inasmuch as contuitive apprehension begins with the actual existent, it agrees with this emphasis. By grasping, in an existential judgment, the *actus essendi* of any finite being—even the “most humble and insignificant,” Mascall insists, we can gain direct access to “self-existent Being itself,” and thereby acknowledge the transcendent cause responsible for the “act by which finite existents exist.”⁵⁵

Finally, in restoring *intellectus* to its rightful place, Mascall maintains that Thomas does not neglect *ratio*; rather, he better defines the “relation between argument and intuition.” Thomas’s “quasi-syllogistic” proofs, though logically tight, chiefly serve in the “formation of an act of intuition.”⁵⁶ To illustrate, Mascall draws a “parallel” case from mathematics. In the effort to master any proof, there is a difference between simply being “convinced by a long chain of reasoning” and attaining an “intimate grasp” of a theorem.⁵⁷ When first exploring an argument, a student might assent to the validity of each step and feel compelled to accept its conclusion, but he remains “dissatisfied” as long as he fails to see “how the premises and conclusion are related as parts of a whole.” To “understand why” a proof works, he must grasp it as a “definite form,” seeing “the conclusion as involved in the premises.”⁵⁸ Such an insight may happen “suddenly,” but it typically arrives only “after a long and painful consideration” of detailed argumentation.⁵⁹ To Mascall, such proofs should be judged “elegant” or “messy” to the degree that they are successful in stimulating an “intuitive grasp” of this kind.⁶⁰ The *Ways* perform a similar function in rousing a contui-

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 51, 79.

⁵⁶ Mascall, *He Who Is*, 79.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

tion: though they “carry complete conviction”—logically speaking—their primary function is to enable the student to get hold of the nature of finite being.⁶¹

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What little comment there has been on Mascall’s position has been mainly negative. In his fine study on *The Cosmological Argument*, for instance, William Lane Craig dismisses contuition: since each of the *Ways* is a “distinct and demonstrative” proof, he notes, none can be considered a mere “expression” of the inadequacy of finite being. “One may wish to advance such a position,” Craig writes, “but it does not represent Aquinas in any way.”⁶² At first glance, it would be difficult to disagree with this assessment. Thomas makes his position clear in *Question 2* of the *Summa*: the *Ways* are demonstrations aimed at establishing God’s existence discursively; they are not “monstrations” used to stimulate the contuitive power.⁶³

Craig’s judgment here seems a bit harsh, and I think something should be said by way of an apologia. In defending Mascall, however, I would not want to suggest that I am in complete agreement with his position or even that he has read Thomas correctly. Rather, I want to argue that, while his work is largely consistent with the Thomist philosophical tradition, there remain serious difficulties with his notion of contuition.

In support of Mascall, I will restrict myself to three brief comments. First, it should be noted that, however unorthodox his treatment of the *Ways* initially appears, it is not all that different from the traditional reading. There is—with both approaches—the same grounding in

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁶² William Lane Craig, *The Cosmological Argument from Plato to Leibniz* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 160.

⁶³ E. I. Watkin, *A Philosophy of Form* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1938), 291. Watkin employs this term when speaking of the *Ways*.

our experience of finite beings, the same emphasis on the real distinction between essence and existence, and the same ascent from knowledge of contingent being to the recognition of a non-contingent creative cause. While not fully endorsing *contuitio*, theologian Aidan Nichols believes that Mascall captures what is essential in Thomas's understanding of "the relation between things and God," and suspects that the *Ways* may indeed be a type of "formalized articulation" of experience which Thomas uses to "prepare a human being for due sensitivity" to the fragility of finite being.⁶⁴

Secondly, though we may tend to side with Craig on the textual issue, we cannot question Mascall's Thomist credentials. In addition to the heavy reliance upon Gilson, his work is filled with the names of other distinguished neo-Thomists. In building his case, he enlists the support of Jacques Maritain, suggesting that *contuitio* is almost identical to Maritain's notion of the "natural contemplation" of "divine things" acquired through "intellectual connaturality."⁶⁵ Moreover, his general treatment of Thomas's account of knowledge, with its stress upon the primacy of *intellectus*, owes much to the pioneering work of the French Jesuit Pierre Rousselot. Mascall even summons the Sacred Monster of Thomism to his defense, noting that the *Ways*, in Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange's august judgment, represent little "more than philosophical refinements of one broad general proof" which is often employed "unreflectively . . . by quite untrained people."⁶⁶ This is not to say that any of these scholars would necessarily agree with Mascall's position, but simply to suggest that his treatment is grounded in a rich, exhaustive study of neo-Thomism.

⁶⁴ Aidan Nichols, *A Grammar of Consent: The Existence of God in Christian Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1991), 82–83.

⁶⁵ Mascall, *He Who Is*, 76.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 37

My third point concerns Mascall's historical treatment of his subject. If his assessment of the British tradition is correct, and the modern scholastics share the empiricists' obsession with *ratio*, they also inherit their unfortunate tendency to neglect *intellectus*. This is a serious charge, but we must not forget Mascall's deeper point in connection to the proofs: the preoccupation with logic-chopping helps obscure a central reason why the *Ways* have become so unpalatable to modern tastes. Many people remain untouched by the proofs not because they lack the deductive wherewithal to follow argumentation, but because they do not possess the "leisure" necessary for a quiet reflection on finite beings.⁶⁷ Whatever our final judgment on *contuitio*, we can certainly sympathize with Mascall's claim that, when the proofs are isolated from their original grounding in experience, they become sterile academic exercises. And we would do well to follow his advice when he recommends that, in order to revive "the plain man's apprehension of God in his creatures," we must not only develop a "reverent attitude to finite beings," but also acquire the requisite intellectual humility to "accept (our) own finitude."⁶⁸ If such is not present, we will never be able to see the "Creator at work in his creatures."⁶⁹

Nevertheless, as I mentioned earlier, there are problems with Mascall's position. I would like to focus on two. First, his study turns upon his understanding of the relation between *ratio* and *intellectus*, but there is some question as to whether his position is fully in line with St. Thomas. Mascall writes as if these are two separate powers; however, in Question 79, article 8 of the *Summa*, Thomas insists that they are simply distinct functions of the same power, a point made clear by their

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 77, 81.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

“respective actions.”⁷⁰ *Intellectus* consists in the apprehension of “intelligible truth,” whereas *ratio* involves the activity of proceeding from “one thing understood to another” in order to grasp truth. Thomas offers by way of contrast the case of the angelic intellect: angels do not employ *ratio* because, already in possession of “perfect knowledge,” they have “no need to advance” in understanding. In exploring the difference between the two functions, he draws a further analogy: *ratio* is likened to *intellectus*, he notes, as “movement is to rest” or “acquisition is to possession.” Just as any movement among natural beings begins from “something immovable” and terminates in “something at rest,” so in the case of intellection, *ratio* first advances “by way of inquiry and discovery” on the basis of “things simply understood”—an *intellectus* of the first principles—and then returns again, “by way of judgement,”

⁷⁰ *Summa Theologiae*, I-I, q. 79, a. 8. The English translation is taken from the Christian Classics edition, translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, Maryland: 1981). The full Latin text of Thomas’s response follows: “Respondeo dicendum quod ratio et intellectus in homine non possunt esse diversae potentiae. Quod manifeste cognoscitur, si utriusque actus consideretur. Intelligere enim est simpliciter veritatem intelligibilem apprehendere. Ratiocinari autem est procedere de uno intellecto ad aliud, ad veritatem intelligibilem cognoscendam. Et ideo angeli, qui perfecte possident, secundum modum suae naturae, cognitionem intelligibilis veritatis, non habent necesse procedere de uno ad aliud; sed simpliciter et absque discursu veritatem rerum apprehendunt, ut Dionysius dicit, 7 cap. *de Div. Nom.* Homines autem intelligibilem veritatem cognoscendam perveniunt, procedendo de uno ad aliud, ut ibidem dicitur: et ideo rationales dicuntur. Patet ergo quod ratiocinari comparatur ad intelligere sicut moveri ad quiescere, vel acquirere ad habere: quorum unum est perfecti, aliud autem imperfecti. Et quia motus semper ab immobili procedit, et ad aliquid quietum terminatur; inde est quod ratiocinatio humana, secundum viam inquisitionis vel inventionis, procedit a quibusdam simpliciter intellectis, quae sunt prima principia; et rursus, in via iudicii, resolvendo redit ad prima principia, ad quae inventa examinat.

Manifestum est autem quod quiescere et moveri non reducuntur ad diversas potentias, sed ad unam et eandem, etiam in naturalibus rebus; quia per eandem naturam aliquid movetur ad locum, et quiescit in loco. Multo ergo magis per eandem potentiam intelligimus et ratiocinamur. Et sic patet quod in homine eadem potentia est ratio et intellectus.” *Summa Theologiae, Prima Pars*, ed. P. Caramello (Turin–Rome, 1948), 389.

to those very same principles in order to examine “by analysis what it has found.” Now just as “movement and rest” originate from the same power in natural things, Thomas concludes, so it is “by the same power” that “we understand and reason.”

What strikes one about this passage is the clear emphasis Thomas places upon the interaction between *ratio* and *intellectus*: insofar as the two functions are rooted in one power, they are interrelated and—to a great degree—interdependent. To advance in knowledge, the intellect must proceed by way of reasoning, yet every step of *ratio* begins and ends with an act of *intellectus*. The example of “movement and rest” is helpful, but the undeveloped case of “possession and acquisition” is equally illuminating. If we were angels, Thomas suggests, our knowledge would be complete and immediate; we would “apprehend the truth simply without mental discussion.” Since such intellectual capacity is unavailable to us, we must struggle to acquire what we do not yet possess, proceeding slowly with great effort in order to reach the truth. Now the question is whether Mascall’s reading agrees with Thomas’s account. His explicit aim is to correct what he considers to be an undue emphasis on *ratio* in modernity, yet one might suggest that, in attempting to restore *intellectus*, he turns in the other direction, unduly neglecting the role of reasoning. When this happens, when “discursive ratiocination” is diminished, not only is the power of *intellectus* exaggerated, but its connection with *ratio* is also severed.

Let us see how this plays out. There is no doubt that argumentation takes a back seat in his treatment. When the *Ways* are employed almost exclusively to induce a contuitive apprehension, they become subordinate to that task. Reducing the proofs to mixed hypotheticals might be useful for pedagogical reasons, but it tends to make them less interesting and may even distort their meaning. We also see this reductive tendency at work in his resolution of the textual issues. In claiming that all of the *Ways* arise from the same contuitive act, Mascall does

secure their deeper unity, but he also neglects what really fascinates scholars—the distinct “syllogizations” Thomas weaves from this act. And though he may dismiss the regress formula as an “historical accident,” nonetheless this argument remains central to any adequate reading of the first three *Ways*.

Along with this neglect of *ratio*, there is a corresponding elevation of *intellectus* in Mascall’s account. British empiricism apparently fails because it denies the intellect’s capacity to “read that which is within the sense qualities” and thus grasp the “inner essence of things.”⁷¹ This is all well and good, but in his desire to save the British academy from itself, Mascall sometimes gives too much credit to *intellectus*. For instance, while praising Rousselot’s characterization of the intellect as a “faculty of intussusception,” given its unique ability to penetrate to the nature of “being itself in all its complexity and fecundity,” he later rebukes this same author for taking a “rather extreme view of (its) limitations.”⁷² And though Mascall is aware of the profound gap between the angelic and the human, denying that our limited minds can fathom the “ontological richness” of any essence, his notion of contuition sounds suspiciously like Thomas’s description of the angelic intellect which can grasp causes immediately in effects, and thus has no need “to syllogize from effect to cause.”⁷³

But the real question concerns his understanding of the relation between *ratio* and *intellectus*. As we have seen, to illustrate how the *Ways* prompt a contuition, Mascall exploits the difference between “being convinced by a chain of reasoning” and acquiring “an intimate grasp” of a mathematical theorem.⁷⁴ Employed as a defense of his position, this example serves him well: the proofs stimulate the mind to

⁷¹ Mascall, *He Who Is*, 84–85.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 78, 84.

⁷³ *Summa Theologiae*, I–I, q. 58, a. 3.

⁷⁴ Mascall, *He Who Is*, 79.

contuit finite beings as they really are. However, if the example is taken to represent his understanding of the working relation between argument and intuition, it should give us pause. In the scenario he envisions, argumentation supposedly contributes to the “formation of an act of intuition,” but it is not precisely clear how it does so.⁷⁵ Mascall seems to suggest that the constant repetition of the steps “through a long and painful consideration” of the proof somehow triggers an insight by which the student gets hold of the form, but this remains something of a mystery.⁷⁶

The relation between *ratio* and *intellectus* becomes more tenuous when one considers his description of the student at work on the proof. When first struggling, he appears saddled with a decidedly Lockean mind, one shrunk to the level of *ratio* and almost bereft of the power of *intellectus*. His perception stops short at the surface because, as Mascall admits, at this stage he can only “assent” to “an external fact”; he sees “how the conclusion is derived from the premises,” yet he does not know why it is true.⁷⁷ On the other hand, when he eventually grasps the argument “in the solid” as it were, he appears in full command of *intellectus*, but one stripped of any trace of, or need for, *ratio*. No longer skimming the surface or assenting to facts, the student has “penetrated to the nature of the object and made it part of himself”; he not only knows why the proof works logically, he “sees the conclusion as involved in the premises.”⁷⁸

If we take this passage as it stands, it presents something of a distortion of Thomas’s position: *ratio* first proceeds without *intellectus*, and then *intellectus* operates without *ratio*, but there seems little connection between the two. Mascall appears to join a Lockean mind to an

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

angelic intelligence in an impossible shotgun wedding. In Question 79, Thomas tells a different story: the light of *intellectus* illumines every move of *ratio* as it advances in truth. Thomas no doubt would agree with Mascall that the ultimate goal here is to grasp the argument's "form"; this is to see the proof "as a whole" and to know how its parts fit within the whole. Yet, as far as the Angelic Doctor is concerned, securing an "intimate grasp" of any argument requires the coordination, and integration, of *ratio* and *intellectus*.

My second question concerns the nature of contuition. As we have seen, Mascall turns to contuition because he believes that the *Ways*, considered as proofs, do not work. Yet there is some question as to whether he has avoided the discursive process. In a critical study of his work, W. E. Kennick claims that the so-called contuitive act whereby we see God "indirectly through finite and sensible beings" is simply "inference in disguise."⁷⁹ Mascall consistently maintains that we reach God through one act of intellection—that to see finite beings as "they really are" is to see them as "God-dependent," to apprehend them in that unique bond that Farrer calls the "cosmological relation."⁸⁰ But Kennick spots a problem here: while Mascall initially admits that we only apprehend finite beings in experience, he later claims that we see "God-and-the-creature-in-relation."⁸¹ How is this possible? Kennick thinks that Mascall falls into this trap because of earlier assertions: he rejects ontologism, and thus denies the direct apprehension of God, but he also rejects any form of inference as a means to establish God's existence. His sole remaining option is to assert that we know God through contuition. But Kennick thinks this surely involves an inferential move which requires not *one* but *two* acts of intellection: a first act

⁷⁹ W. E. Kennick, "A New Way With The Five Ways," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 38, no. 3 (1960): 225–233.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 231.

in which we grasp the contingency of finite beings; and a second one in which we infer the existence of non-contingent being. He provides a nice counter-example:

Is this not like telling me that if I look in a certain place what I shall see is not the cat-without-the-mat, nor the mat-without-the-cat, but the cat-and-the-mat-in-relation though I cannot see the cat directly at all. If all I can see is the mat, how can I be said to see the cat-and-the-mat-in-relation, unless all you mean by this is that from seeing some peculiar features of the mat I can infer the presence of the cat which I cannot see.⁸²

This would apply, with some qualification, to the case of contuition: one might infer God's existence from certain features of finite beings, but there is no question of apprehending Him directly or indirectly. And Kennick points out that Mascall cannot escape this difficulty by citing the medieval distinction between *ratio* and *intellectus* or by emphasizing the intellect's magical capacity to grasp the "intelligible metaphysical being" of things.⁸³ Even if all this were the case, once Mascall admits that our apprehension only encompasses finite beings, contuition becomes just another inference. And the analogy with cats and mats holds: just as from the casual inspection of the "seen mat" we can only deduce the "unseen cat," so from "the intellectually apprehended features of finite beings," we can indeed arrive at "the intellectually unapprehended being of God," but only by way of inference.⁸⁴

Kennick seems correct in his analysis. Unfortunately, Mascall cannot follow him down this path; he rejects any discursive process, admitting that the "existence of a being in which essence and existence are really distinct does not logically imply the existence of a being in

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 233.

which essence and existence are identical.”⁸⁵ But this leaves him with a further problem according to Kennick: without any grounding in the traditional argument, there is really no basis for intuitive apprehension. In other words, if the real distinction does not logically entail the proposition “God exists,” if there is no contradiction in holding it while simultaneously denying that finite beings are God-dependent, there is certainly no difficulty in claiming that one can see finite beings as they really are without necessarily apprehending God as their creative source. When all is said and done, Kennick concludes, Mascall’s attempt to revive natural theology on “non-argumentative” grounds is a “failure” and amounts to little more than a woozy combination of “linguistic and logical truisms” and an “attitude of wonder . . . directed at things which most of us take for granted.”⁸⁶

This is a telling phrase on Kennick’s part. As a good Christian, Mascall never takes anything for granted. Indeed, he considers the attitude of contemplative wonder an essential prerequisite for the practicing theist: in speaking of contingency as the basis of Thomas’s proofs, he declares that we can never “become theists if we take the world for granted; but so long as we do *not* take it for granted we are within measurable distance of taking it as granted to us by God.”⁸⁷ The problem is that Kennick sees no good reason why we should *not* take the world for granted. When he considers the real distinction between essence and existence, he does not see a “metaphysical truth” disclosing the “creative activity” of God, but simply an expression of the obvious fact that “finite beings come into existence and pass away.”⁸⁸ And radical contingency for him never translates into ontological dependence. In the end, the experience of intuition depends upon whether or not

⁸⁵ Mascall, *Existence and Analogy*, 78.

⁸⁶ Kennick, “A New Way With The Five Ways,” 232–233.

⁸⁷ Mascall, *Existence and Analogy*, 85.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 229

one sees God's presence in finite beings, and Kennick simply does not see it. What accounts for his distinct lack of wonder at the sight of things "that are and cannot be"?⁸⁹ Has he failed to develop that "reverent attitude to finite beings" that Mascall considers so essential for the apprehension of God in His creatures? Or has his contuitive power become so deadened by a secular culture that it can no longer function adequately? In seeking an answer to such questions, we must examine anew the ultimate basis of Mascall's own teaching.



**On Not Taking the World for Granted:
E. L. Mascall on The Five Ways**

SUMMARY

Considered one of the leading proponents of natural theology in the 20th century, E. L. Mascall (1905–1993) taught philosophy and theology at King's College London for most of his career. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he insisted that classical theism, embodied in the writings of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, could be successfully revived for a modern audience. Known for his vigorous defense of neo-Thomism, Mascall offered an unusual interpretation of The Five Ways. While modern scholastics typically read the proofs as syllogistic exercises, Mascall maintained that God's existence could not be deduced from premises, but must be grasped by means of a unique type of "metaphysical intuition" which he called "contuition." In my paper, I will re-examine his position, explore his reasons for adopting it, and finally raise several questions concerning its significance for the history of neo-Thomism.

KEYWORDS

The Five Ways, Mascall, Aquinas, neo-Thomism, contuition, natural theology, Locke, British empiricism, scholasticism, theistic proofs, ontologism, ratio, intellectus.

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⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 85. This phrase is a quotation from G. K. Chesterton's *A Second Childhood*, one of Mascall's favorite poems.

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