

A Philosophical Response to Donald Keefe's Creation as Existential Contingency

Roger Duncan
Fairfield University

In "Creation as Existential Contingency" Fr. Donald Keefe offers a précis of some of his most important theological contentions, claims that have renewing potential for metaphysics in our time. Philosophical objections to his paper might be raised chiefly around his neglect of analogy and consequent disregard for the subtle dialectic between philosophy and theology. Of a piece with this tendency is his summary dismissal of cosmological argumentation for the existence of God. Philosophical contributions outweigh these objections, however, opposing difference and relation to the monotony and cosmic pessimism of classical monistic visions of ultimate Being, insisting on freedom as a transcendental, and pointing toward a resolution of the time-eternity dichotomy.

I. CRITICISMS, QUERIES AND CAVEATS

Fr. Keefe's thinking is arguably some of the most important theology going on. Like all good theology, it offers important insights and challenges to philosophy, challenges that I shall be talking about shortly. First I want to make a few critical comments.

Keefe, in his zeal for the Covenant, perhaps impatiently tends to treat all thinking outside of or in abstraction from the Covenant as more or less a waste of time, a dallying with conceptual schemes that are not only inadequate but also necessarily incommensurable. He sometimes even seems to treat classical philosophies anachronistically as if the ancient thinkers were trying in their writings to approximate rationalist systems. But surely the philosophies of Plato or Aristotle or Plotinus are more like loosely bound sets of insights and partial truths expressed in slippery analogical language. Philosophy is primarily inquiry, not system, and the relationship between philosophy and theology can never be reduced to that between less adequate and more adequate "systems." In any case, Keefe himself says we need a metaphysics.

Being remains our most comprehensive notion. Metaphysics is about being, as *Fides et Ratio* reminds us.¹ Theology, which goes beyond metaphysics by tracing the free dealings of the tri-personal God with creation, sinks below metaphysics (back into anthropomorphism and myth) the moment it jettisons the cushion of metaphysics. (Von Balthasar understood this). Let us say, then, with Keefe that the Covenant is the "prime analogate." Analogate of what? Keefe says it is the paradigm of "substance" and substance of course is a category of being. Indeed this had better be an analogy of being. We want theology to say more than philosophy, not less, and it won't if it loses the breadth of being. This impels us into a dialectic between the search for what always is, attempting to trace "necessities" of being (e.g., being = good) without recourse to a trusted authority; and a thinking which traces the freely willed adventures of the covenant known

¹ *Fides et Ratio* 5, 41, 48, 66, 79, 90, 97.

by revelation and believed in faith. Of course the latter is superior in the sense that it represents the free source of the former, in the way existence rules essence. On the other hand, the former enjoys a priority *in the order of knowing* because it gropes after “how it stands with being.” There is no resolving this tension; there is only living with it and enjoying it. (In general, Keefe seems not to enjoy it too much and as a result to neglect the apophatic corrective supplied by sensitivity to this difference between the order of knowing and the order of being).

Being splits *for us* into the necessary and the free, as it does into essence and existence. Many champions of ontological insight have from the beginning (Parmenides) pressed for a solid block of necessity. At the other extreme, “Existentialism” in all its forms presses for existence over essence, freedom over necessity, sometimes to the point of sheer irrationalism. But, to strike a Keefian key, it is true that w/ Godel we can see that our necessities are systemic bracketings within (essentially!) open systems, and w/ Whitehead we can agree that our essences are relatively stable structures within creative advance. Yet *pace* Keefe we do not thereby get rid of necessities, which represent insights into connection, as when we are describing the necessary structure of freedom itself. We must realize that what we are pointing to lies beyond the dichotomy of these abstractions and that we are epistemologically challenged – essentially. This “beyond” has always been represented in Thomistic philosophy by saying that God, on the one hand, does have an essence, but that on the other hand, his essence is simply existence.

Keefe laments the partial conversion of Thomism. Well, we must convert it, and the whole onto-theological enterprise of which it is a shining example, ever more in the light supplied by dogma and by the Scriptures brandished by the theologian. But I fear a total conversion is impossible. Skating is indeed improved by removing friction, but removing the friction entirely leaves us with no traction and no skating. Good, philosophically robust theology may keep absorbing insights from Scripture, or from the liturgy of which Scripture is a part. Only a partial conversion is possible. Looked at from the other end, dogmatically pure theology must partially convert in the other, philosophical direction also if it wants to say anything. Better yet, by its very nature it has already begun to, because it must use language.

CONTINGENCY AND THE UNCAUSED CAUSE

Keefe argues that when considering “creation” as something produced it is important to distinguish two senses of contingency – essential contingency – i.e., mere logical possibility of being, and substantial contingency – actually created. “Essential contingency” says a lot less than “substantial contingency.” Now, we might agree that they are not the same, but argue that they are not contraries or contradictories either. I.e., we might consider essential contingency a subaltern of. Everything that is substantially contingent must also be essentially contingent, but not vice versa.

Be that as it may, things get serious when Keefe maintains that while essential contingency cannot establish dependence let alone a creator, substantial contingency presupposes a creator.

The ultimate foundation of this dilemma for Keefe is that essentially contingency is only logical and any jump from mere logical possibility of non-being (the proposition *e* exists is not necessary) to real, ontological dependence is unwarranted.

Now the Thomist, traditional or otherwise, tends to react to this charge with the claim that while contingency is certainly different from dependence, he is talking about real contingency. Where, the Thomist would ask, does Keefe get the warrant to say that when we call an existent thing contingent we are really only saying that the proposition ‘X exists’ is not a tautology? An existent finite thing or state-of-affairs *really could* just as well not be. Of course Keefe might respond that the problem lies elsewhere. It might be argued that when we appeal to the fact that we often see cases where an entity or state-of-affairs of some sort does not come into being or obtain, say, when its causes are withheld, we are talking about the thing only by reference to a type of which it is an instance, and *that* is only logical, not real. However, this sort of nominalism, if it is indeed what Keefe holds, would lead us beyond the possibility of speech altogether, at least speech of the type found in books that Keefe certainly does not want to commit to Hume’s bonfire.

In short, I am claiming that Keefe’s rejection of the arguments for the existence of God as they are defended in the Thomist tradition may rest on an untenable nominalism that would undermine the realism Keefe’s theology needs.

There are many other little questions that could be asked, e.g., on p. 14, how does the failure to establish the creator’s freedom tend in any way to establish His non-freedom? Yet without that inference Keefe’s argument seems to come to nothing. I prefer, however, given the time constraints of this presentation, to pass to the important implications of Fr. Keefe’s paper for the new metaphysics called for by *Fides et Ratio*.

II. POSITIVE APPROPRIATIONS

The Relationship between Faith and Reason, or between theology and philosophy. The difference in question, which I have claimed does not go away, has to do with what seems to be demonstrable without appeal to authoritative witness and what seems to be knowable only upon the basis of a trusting acceptance of Divine proclamation. Listening to Fr. Keefe will at least sensitize us to the fact that these spheres will have fuzzy boundaries, and what boundaries are discernible will shift historically. This is because, on the one hand, our demonstrations and insights are in a way question-begging for Godelian and linguistic reasons, and on the other, that the assertions of Scripture and dogma depend on being couched in human language for their intelligibility – they use words with all their overtones and interconnections and with the weight of all the scrutiny and analysis those words have undergone.

Yet we must insist on this: *Revelation always appeals implicitly to what we know, somehow or other, independently of its declaration.* Philosophy, for its part, and because it too depends on language, anchors itself in much that is mysterious, and here we can make the point in the

opposite direction. *What we know is incapable of representation in a finished system.* Further, supposedly untutored “reason” argues its points with concepts/words that it accepts as given. The naming of the animals precedes inferences about them. But where exactly does the naming come from? That is mysterious, as Heidegger would have it. What is certain is that the naming takes place just as much in the context of revelation as not.

Take an example from *Fides et Ratio*. The provenance of the concept of *person* is dogmatic, but its current general acceptance enjoys a significant measure of phenomenological self-evidence.² Or consider this statement from Emmanuel Levinas, where he is speaking to Christian thinkers about Incarnation and Substitution

These ideas, at first blush theological, overturn the categories of our representation. So I want to ask myself to what extent these ideas, which have unconditional value for the Christian faith, have philosophical value, and to what extent they can appear in phenomenology. True, it is a phenomenology that is already the beneficiary of Judeo-Christian wisdom. That is no doubt the case – but consciousness does not assimilate everything in the various wisdoms. It supplies phenomenology only with what has been able to nourish it. Hence I ask myself to what extent the new categories we have just described are philosophical. I am certain that this extent will be judged insufficient by the believing Christian. But it may not be a waste of time to show the points beyond which nothing can replace religion.³

I am simply claiming that this subtle understanding of the relationship between faith and reason, more like the two wings⁴ than the two stories, is not only compatible with Fr. Keefe’s understanding of the always graced creation; it is implied by it.

Difference, otherness: To recognize the primary analogate of substance as covenantal and relational is, from the standpoint of the philosophical tradition both East and West, to evaluate difference...differently. Certainly we must recognize that created being is “less than,” lower than, Divine Being, who alone can say I AM. Where we must accept Keefe’s corrective is around the issue of whether that “less” can be simply represented as many vs. One. To so represent it would deliver us over to the pessimism Keefe elsewhere rightly criticizes.⁵ I.e., where difference is only an ontological letdown all the relations and synergetic interactions of created things will be second-class, functions of a falling away. No: Difference (and relation) everywhere have their foundation in a Prime Analogate where they are realized *even more* fully than in creation.

Difference, then, I suggest, is not non-being, but instead a function of the “excess” of being itself. That excess can be possessed without any admixture of non-being, as in the immanent

² *Ibid.*, 76.

³ “A Man-God?” in *Entre Nous* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) 54.

⁴ *Fides et Ratio*, opening sentence.

⁵ *Covenantal Theology* (Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1991) p.210ff.

Trinity Fr. Keefe wants to delete. Within creation it can be mixed: it is a sign certainly of the poverty of created being (to say nothing of the erosion of unity due to the Fall) but also of its richness of otherness and difference in the Divine image. We can see how this can be when we grasp that Being at full strength (God) is infinite, which implies that any attempt to restrain it by logical identity betrays it, i.e., it can never be pinned down as just this and not anything else. It is this and also that, this and more: enter difference. (Pavel Florensky says $A=A+-A$).⁶ In any case we might want to say that everything all the way down the hierarchy of being participates in this more – “A= (only) A” being the limit point of non-existence. Knowing is the most familiar instance to the Thomist of this stretch of being, an instance Maritain strives manfully to state “without scandal to the principle of identity.”⁷ “To know is to become the other as other.” But everything, we might suggest in union with Whitehead, is analogously a knower precisely as causally receptive. In short, insofar as it follows this covenantal lead, metaphysics in our time will want to investigate the universal or transcendental presence of one thing “in” another and of all things “in” all other things. It will want to explore the way real, existing being, and *a fortiori* its personal paradigm, always transcends essential identity.

Relation: Again, if the prime analogate of substance is Covenantal, then it is essentially relational, and if so, relation takes on a new ontological status, no longer confined to the Aristotelian category of accident. a) Substance *enters into* real relations that are not simply external. In these relations substance is at once further individuated – “union differentiates” – and at the same time rendered less self-contained (less isolatedly “substantial”). To be in such relationships is precisely, as it were, the point for substances; the very exchange or coinherence of the relationship is itself a *telos* for individuals; b) Substance is *constituted* relationally. Metaphysics builds on physics, and today’s science suggests the replacement of one-way dynamisms with synergetic bondings. For instance, the ancients represented what we call gravity as a tendency, teleologically resident in a substance, toward its “proper place.” However, since Newton we have represented gravitational force as something that takes place *between* things, something that shows up only insofar as they are mutually related, and is never reducible to an additive result of two independently calculable dynamisms. Similarly, all the other basic forces, electromagnetic, strong and weak forces in the nucleus, are, if you will, mutualities. While this ubiquitous relational structure is more or less apparent to everyone and is, I believe, the sort of thing Aristotle living in our time would have pounced upon, it has not provided nearly enough metaphysical mileage to the positivistically limited thought of our time. In any case, certainly this cosmic relationality is illuminated by Keefe’s claim that the Prime Analogate of substance is a covenantal dyad. Theology encourages metaphysics here to a new appreciation of the *analogy of relationality*.

As a corollary, the idea of *receptivity* begins to stretch the Aristotelian categories to the breaking point. Thomist philosopher Norris Clarke writes:

⁶ Pavel Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997) 14-36

⁷ Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1959) p. 114

Receptivity as such should be looked on not as essentially a sign of imperfection, of poverty, of potentiality in the receiver, as we have tended to look on it, but as in itself a positive aspect or perfection of being.⁸

Perhaps we have to go farther. Since active receptivity cannot, without losing its unity, be expressed simply as a quick oscillation of actions and passions it seems we have hit upon a fundamental category which cannot be fit into the Aristotelian scheme and which therefore promises to relativize the categories of act and potency.

Free will, Novelty, and Change That the entire universe of created being escapes determinism to some extent seems to be one of Keefe's concerns, which he expresses by objecting that the Aristotelian view, preordaining substances to a range of possibilities resident *a priori* in their potentialities, is deterministic. Whether the Aristotelian picture is deterministic in the contemporary sense, in which temporally sequential event causation is placed under the sway of necessity, may of course be debated. After all, an Aristotelian world, in which there are real medium sized things, is one in which the only way to account for the presence of a monkey-constituting micro particle at a new place is by referring to the fact that the monkey jumped. Such a world entails the subordination of laws governing the behavior of lower things to emergent laws governing their integrating wholes, and at least at the human level there could be emergent laws or patterns including free will. At least that is the way Thomists have, I believe, seen things. They have perhaps not gone far enough to recognize that such a view demands a micro indeterminacy at the lowest levels.

In any case what would seem to be in order is the development of an understanding of causation and change relegating rigid necessity to the limit point of non-existence. In the construction of this view we can take important direction from Fr. Keefe's theology, by noting carefully his discussion of grace.

Keefe argues that grace cannot be an accident – it cannot be a proper accident because then it is not grace, and it cannot be an accident in the wider sense because then it would be subordinate to nature. Though one can fall from grace, there is in the reception of grace, particularly in its final victory, a serious change, the production of a New Man that cannot be reduced to the temporary possession of a quality. (I suggest that this has to do with fact that grace is relational – it is relational participation in the life of a relational God. As we have seen, relation cannot be merely one of the categories of substance, unambiguously subordinate to substance.) Unless we are to treat the operation of grace as an absolute exception, with no analogy to ordinary change, we will need *a new model of change capable of producing real novelty*. To use another theological example, one that concerns Keefe enormously in his monumental *Covenantal Theology*: is the Eucharistic change, which cannot be interpreted as either substantial or accidental, a bizarre exception or a high paradigm?

⁸ Norris Clarke, S. J., *Person and Being* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1998) p. 20.

Already the later scholastics were exploring the paradox that, as Maritain expresses it, though there is nothing in the effect that is not in the cause, the cause plus its effect amount to more than the cause taken by itself.⁹ They stressed a divine concurrence that, since they were thinking of how simultaneous causation unfurls at each moment into a new moment, has implications for the cosmic temporal advance. Later thinkers like Rahner, and even more radically, Whitehead, saw novelty and proto-freedom entering at this point. In Rahner's version substances at every level to some degree transcend themselves, continually exceeding the limits of their nature, in response to the immanent lure of the self-subsisting, transcendent Final Cause.¹⁰ For Whitehead, actual entities or occasions, also in relation to the Divine heaven of possibilities, synthesize input from everything that precedes them while adding their own new, though often negligible, responses.

Human freedom is of course more than indeterminism – it is creative response within the Covenant. Yet I suggest we need a model that sees it building on the proto-freedom of novel resolution at lower levels. As we ascend the hierarchy of being, higher-level substances dominate their parts more and more, and there is more and more novelty. The Fall would be seen as unhooking all this from the Covenant and the result is relative necessity – directionless non-necessity ironing out to statistical necessity.

In short, Keefe's theology of change and freedom is not only suggestive for philosophy but would seem to demand a philosophy of nature along the lines developed by Bergson, Whitehead, Rahner, and others.

Time & Etenity. Up till now we have been “doctoring” things within an onto-theological map or within the presupposition that such a map is possible. Contemporary continental philosophers have shown impatience with all such maps through a critique of the *metaphysics of presence*.

Briefly what that means is that Kant was right about time. Time for us must stretch infinitely back – and, at the same time (!), must not. In theology we talk blithely about an end of time, and a beginning, but in fact we cannot represent a beginning or an end of a time that is ineluctably thought of as infinite in both linear directions. Represented time is a string of presents on a horizontal line. (Note that the temporal “present” is a word that contains reference to the conditions of its presence to someone.) Intrinsic to this unthinkable model is the ontological commitment to the sole reality of the present. The past is not, the future is not yet, and so the being of something is actual only at the zero point of the presented present. We compensate for the paucity of this abstraction by postulating an equally abstract, paradoxical timeless eternity, a *nunc stans*, an eternal present! The problem of being and time is set up, with Being in its fullness

⁹ Jacques Maritain, Preface to *Metaphysics* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1937) P. 137

¹⁰ See Karl Rahner, *Hominization: The Evolutionary Origin of Man as a Theological Problem*, trans. S.T. O'Hara (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1965)

retreating to this static though also unthinkable eternity. Within this picture Western metaphysics rings all the changes of its theory of being.

According to Heidegger this representation is not in any simple sense a mistake; it is a once fertile way of looking at things that has now played itself out historically. Heidegger's project was to try to take a step back into the subject-object clearing *in which* this map of being shows up. At first expressing this subjectively accessed deeper reality beyond the split of Eternity and Time as Being – this is the true “ontological difference” – he later abandoned being language. Emmanuel Levinas redefines this originary realm as the place of ethical immediacy, prior to all the objectifying thought of philosophy. In any case the idea is that there is a different sort of thinking that goes on outside the map and out from under the dominance of the visual metaphor, a kind of thinking that we are called to do now, in this historical epoch.

Keefe joins this project insofar as he wants to develop a theology free from the presuppositions of the onto-theological map. Theology cannot let a system of any sort be normative for is said. What is more, theology is historical, and it is about the free dealings of the covenant God with his people. Yet as I have said above, we don't get beyond being language, systematic or not, that easily, and Keefe's own language calls for analysis in relation to the analogy of being.

I want to suggest that we look at it this way. We don't have to become Kantians to appreciate Kant. Where Kant fell down was in thinking of reality in itself as completely unknowable, as if the partial truth of our maps were simply false. But a projection, say a Mercator projection, while it “distorts” is nevertheless reliable, theoretically and practically. Now in philosophy and theology we are stuck, if you like, with a projection, and knowing this makes us sympathetic to Thomas' avowal that it is all straw. Yet we must work with this intrinsically distorted two-dimensional map, though allowing hints from the third dimension to inform it. We cannot see around the edges of this map, but we can perhaps *hear* around them, and this is where the word of faith impacts us.

Above I said that the thinker will have to talk not only about what God does but also about what God is, always. Time- eternity: this is the way things break up for us as soon as we try to make an objective map, the very respectable work of onto-theology. Keefe tries to get beyond this divide by denying an immanent (necessary?) Trinity leaving us with an economic free Trinity – historical, he says. However both, the immanent and the economic, the eternal and the temporal, are abstractions, and abstractions we cannot straightforwardly get around. The strategy of reducing one to the other, in either direction, fails and we are stuck with the stereoscopic perspective. In short, the philosopher and theologian together need to accept the critique of the metaphysics of presence – without trying to do a totally new sort of metaphysics.

Yet we are not left abandoned to onto theology. One of the profoundest implications of Fr. Keefe's *Covenantal Theology*, to my mind, is his perception of the Eucharistic celebration as the place where, for us here and now, we are lifted out of fallen time, not theoretically but actually. In this participation in the *anamnesis* we do not see around the edges of the map but we leave the

map for the reality of deep time. I want to suggest that this Deep Time, not an abstract eternity, is the place not only of Levinas' ethical immediacy, where each sees and serves the poverty and majesty of the other(s) but also the place of covenantal mutual indwelling. Fr. Keefe's insistent pointing to this Eucharistic locus as the unsayable ground of our theological and philosophical stammering remains the most important contribution of his theology and its interface with postmodern concerns.