

# Review Essay

by Mark S. Latkovic

## *The Way toward Wisdom: An Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Introduction to Metaphysics*

by Benedict M. Ashley, OP

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This massively learned book—one that probably only someone of Fr. Ashley’s learning could write—serves as a marvelous capstone of sorts to a long and fruitful philosophical and theological career that is still quite productive. The now ninety-six-year-old Dominican has always had a deep fascination with an “interdisciplinary” approach to knowledge, as evidenced in his 1985 book, *Theologies of the Body*. In *The Way toward Wisdom*, Ashley expands his range to explicitly include an “intercultural” approach to the problem of how to organize and unify the ever-growing body of human knowledge and how to deal with the ever-increasing pluralism that characterizes our (post)modern age, where, especially in the university, modern science has dislodged metaphysics and its traditional role of coordinating the disciplines.

How is meaningful dialogue possible today when cultures seem to talk past each other? Ashley offers a particular kind of metaphysics, or what he calls “metascience,” as a “way toward wisdom” and a way to avoid what many call the “clash of civilizations.” The term “metascience,” Ashley believes, better describes the fact that it organizes the truths found in all the special sciences, not just physics, while respecting their autonomy (132–133, 405). This discipline is born from confidence in the power of reason to save more than the “appearances,” as conceived by modern science, and to accurately describe, however gradually and imperfectly, the nature of changeable being, of reality itself—in other words, to attain certain conclusions (219–220, 222).

In four parts that span fourteen chapters, two short appendices, seven diagrams, seventy-odd pages of endnotes, and a lengthy bibliography and index, Ashley sets forth his vision for a metaphysics that is not only an introduction to the subject but also an explanation of why it is a valid intellectual pursuit today—despite its contemporary philosophical dismissal amidst widespread intellectual fragmentation. His purpose is to show precisely what kind of metaphysics satisfies the claim to be true and valuable (xix). He attempts what he refers to as a “postmodern vindication” of the subject (240).

For readers of this journal, Ashley’s metaphysics, rooted as it is in a realist Aristotelian–Thomistic epistemology (although Ashley qualifies the term “realist,” 293–294), has implications for bioethics—in particular, in its rootedness in nature and its appreciation of what modern science can tell us about the human body. In this review, I can only hope to summarize the book’s main contents while highlighting central and significant points.

### *From Natural Science to Metaphysics*

Chapter 1 serves as an elementary introduction to the problem of the knowledge explosion and the lack of confidence, especially in our universities, in our ability to integrate the various disciplines into some kind of meaningful whole or understanding. The same is true for culture. Ashley speaks of the need for “contextualization”—that is, the need to situate worldviews and their value systems in the particular cultures in which they originate without, however, falling into relativism.

All cultures or ways of living, Ashley affirms, seek some form of “wisdom,” however false that wisdom may be. Thus, he reviews what some of the major world religions have said about this matter. In the West (the “Western Ecumene,” as he calls it), it is secular humanism, with its reliance on science and technology, that is the dominant cultural worldview. Ashley also informs us of the model of dialogue he will pursue: rather than one of “conversion” or “refutation,” he adopts “reconciliation” as most appropriate for a fruitful exchange of views.

Chapter 2 takes us on a fascinating historical review and critique of what the great philosophical traditions—from the ancients to the medievals to the moderns—have said about metaphysics and how to coordinate the various branches of knowledge. So from Plato and Aquinas to Kant and the postmodern critique of modern philosophy, Ashley’s tour of this philosophical development picks out what is most salient—both good and bad—in each thinker.

Concluding the chapter is Ashley’s brief sketch of the (eight) most prominent varieties of twentieth century Thomism since Leo XIII’s *Aeterni patris* (1879), among them Existential and Transcendental Thomism, and how each has envisioned metaphysics and its relationship to natural science. This provides useful historical background for understanding his view of metaphysics in part 2. While, of these eight, Ashley favors and adopts Aristotelian Thomism (sometimes called “River Forest Thomism”)—against Platonic–Cartesian dualism, subjectivism, skepticism, and reductionism—he is always fair and balanced in his summaries and assessments of the various thinkers and schools he treats, even incorporating their good points, thus modeling the dialogue he seeks to foster.

Chapter 3 continues Ashley’s goal of showing how metaphysics is possible—but a particular kind of metaphysics: one whose subject (being-as-being, *esse*) has first been established, as Aristotelian Thomists affirm, *by means of natural science demonstrating “the existence of immaterial being as the cause of material being”* (53, emphasis

added). Here Ashley makes the case for natural philosophy as “epistemologically first” among the disciplines by providing a primer on its basic concepts, principles, characteristic way of proceeding, and fundamental theorem: “Change is the generic property of changeable being” (75).

He does so by thoroughly adhering to Aristotle’s way of organizing any critical discipline, including an architectonic Wisdom, that is, metaphysics. This involves employing the *Posterior Analytics*’ four scientific questions, beginning with “Does the subject of inquiry exist?” and “How can it be defined?” Ashley concludes that natural science shows us that a changing substance (question 1) is essentially composed of matter and form (question 2). To be a changeable being (*ens mobile*), in other words, is “essentially and radically to be an actualized potentiality, that is, composed of formed matter” (76).

Before answering questions 3 and 4—“What are its properties?” and “Why does it have these properties?”—Ashley describes the first two principles of natural science: noncontradiction and causality. He then, as a background to questions 3 and 4 about the causes of properties, treats the nine categories of properties (i.e., “proper accidents” such as quantity, quality, and so on) that all changeable substances (itself a category) have and that indeed are “necessary to describe any natural phenomenon” (84). These facts, Ashley argues, can be explained in terms of Aristotle’s four causes: material, efficient, formal, and final.

Chapter 3 closes with Ashley skillfully dealing with three disputed questions which center on the credibility of Aristotelian natural science. As Ashley notes in its defense, the epistemological priority of natural science does not, however, qualify it to serve as “the architectonic, interdisciplinary, and cross-cultural discipline that human wisdom must be” (90–91). This *would* be the case if *only* sensible, material being existed. But that is what is in question and what still needs to be proved.

Chapter 4 provides just such an extended proof that a first immaterial cause exists. This proof culminates in what Ashley calls

the “foundational theorem” of natural science: a “prime mover” that requires no other mover to act exists, but it cannot be a material mover, since no material thing either moves itself or is in motion without being moved by another. Ashley formulates this argument syllogistically from effects to cause for the existence of a First Cause of the universe and its nonmateriality, noting that this proof from motion is found in Aristotle’s *Physics* VIII and is adopted by Aquinas as the first and most evident of his “five ways” to demonstrate the existence of a First Cause (97–98).

Following this same line of argument from Aristotle and Aquinas, Ashley also proves the immateriality of the human soul, thus convincingly showing how modern science is wrong to reduce thinking to a material organ, that is, the brain, or to liken it to a computer. The larger point, however, is that this demonstration of the spiritual soul’s existence is a vital “application of the general argument for the existence of an immaterial cause or causes for the changes we observe in our world. It supports the argument for an immaterial First Cause, by recognizing in our human experience an analogue . . . to a nonmaterial Prime Mover of the natural universe” (114).

We live, then, in a universe of both material and spiritual substances (Common Being, *ens commune*), which also includes pure spiritual beings known in the Bible as angels. These pure spirits are “prime movers of independent lines of causality in the universe” (197). And so, for Ashley, natural science “validates” First Philosophy but is not itself (nor are practical disciplines such as ethics or speculative disciplines such as mathematics or logic) First Philosophy.

Chapter 5 serves as a bridge of sorts to part 2. Ashley summarizes part 1 and begins first to describe more fully the proper subject of an autonomous metascience. Second, he ably treats objections to his natural science approach that come from other respected Thomists, such as Etienne Gilson, Lawrence Dewan, John Wippel, Joseph Owens, and John Knasas, and from modern science, concluding that the latter when properly grounded does not challenge the legitimacy

of a metascience of material and immaterial being. Ashley also shows how it makes sense to speak of metascience outside of the Aristotelian tradition.

According to Ashley, the subject of metascience is (and he formulates it several ways) everything that is real; all *contingent* “material and immaterial substances along with their properties under [the] formality of *esse*” (143). Thus, the First Cause is *not* its subject, but rather its end. The task of metascience is to reason “analogically from the essences and properties of material beings to the essences and properties of spiritual beings” (197). It is only metascience, human wisdom, “that has as its proper task to consider all things under the formality of their interrelated yet marvelously diverse and dynamic existences” (143).

Noteworthy is Ashley’s claim that Existential Thomists are suspicious of attempts to ground metascience on what they perceive to be the shaky ground of natural science, because they fear it would jeopardize “the independent certitude” of metaphysics, whose subject they emphasize is *esse*. But Ashley points out that Aristotelian Thomists expect natural science to prove only the existence of immaterial causes—nothing more, nothing less—using proofs that are “entirely independent of any of the details of natural science that are subject to revision because they are only probable” (162–163).

#### *Metascience and the Properties of Being*

Chapter 6 opens part 2 and really forms a larger whole with chapters 7 through 11, because in these chapters Ashley presents his actual treatise in metaphysics. “It is the task of Metascience,” Ashley argues, “to ‘define’ and demonstrate that [besides “thing” and “something”] the other three transcendentals—Unity, Truth, and Goodness—are, in this improper [i.e., analogical] sense, properties of Being, and hence in diverse analogical ways verifiable of all beings” (174).

In the even chapters of part 2, Ashley describes the One and the Many (chap. 6), the True and the False (chap. 8), and the Good and the Bad (chap. 10), “as to what these analogical concepts illumine in the

metascientific concept of Being as such and why they are its necessary attributes” (174). In the odd chapters, he explains how each of these three transcendentals apply in different special senses to the principal sciences of nature and mathematics (chap. 7), the practical disciplines of ethics and politics (chap. 9), and the arts (chap. 11).

In chapter 6, Ashley first demonstrates that being as such is one and that unity is a property of every being. He then explores the diversity of being, first examining the unity and plurality of contingent material beings and then the unity of contingent spiritual substances (i.e., the embodied soul and contingent pure spirits which, he explains, form a hierarchy), concluding with how this transcendental is related to efficient causality by the fact that it “produces both unity and plurality in the universe” (198).

Arguing from causes to their effects, metascience, in brief, “seeks a view of the whole universe that is principally spiritual and only secondarily material. In the human person, Metascience finds the *microcosm* in which matter and spirit are joined in a single kind of substance. Human persons by their intelligences and wills are truly members of the community of spirits whose goal is contemplation of the total universe and, through it, contemplation of its Creator, the Supreme Spirit” (197).

In chapter 7, the exploration of unity and plurality in the other sciences begins with mathematics, focusing on the sense in which the objects it studies are “beings” (i.e., whether and how they exist). Specifically, Ashley is interested in how unity and plurality are found in mathematical objects, “where they have their most explicit and simple exemplification” (201–202). He gives an excellent summary of what metascience does for mathematics on page 218.

The unity and plurality of the material universe as it is presently known through natural science in terms of mathematical physics are then treated. This is followed by their treatment in ethics and politics, and in technologies and fine arts—both of which, although practical, depend on the theoretical natural sciences. He shows how this

transcendental has different but important applications in these sciences.

Chapter 8 examines the transcendental property Truth and formal causality, beginning with the “varieties of truth,” that is, the distinctions between “logical truth” and “ontological truth,” between the *subjective* and *objective*, and between the *theoretical* and *practical*. Ashley argues against Kant’s “consistency” theory of truth in favor of the classical definition of truth as the “conformity of the mind to reality.”

Next he turns to the “sources” of truth, describing different styles of human reasoning (e.g., the scientific mentality of modern culture versus the nonscientific reasoning approach) and the role of faith and revelation as well as mystical experience in the three monotheistic religions. After this comparison of the worldviews, based on revelation and reason on one side and intuition and mystical experience on the other, Ashley observes that metascience needs “to remain open to truth that is intuitive rather than rational and that has superhuman sources.” At the same time, with its help, we must “be cautious that we are neither credulous nor lacking in humility and prudent discernment” (245).

The last two parts of chapter 8 deal first with epistemology, with a special focus on responses to the problem of Skepticism provided by Idealism, Empiricism, and Aristotelian Thomism, and second with formal causality and participation. In critiquing skepticism and other epistemologies, Ashley argues that his Aristotelian epistemology is both “more critical and more comprehensive” than these. It also “renounces metascientific claims that are not grounded in sense experience while keeping the way open to the possibility of a metascience that extends to immaterial reality . . . leav[ing] room for an Other who is Mystery” (264–265).

Between these two topics, Ashley includes a brief but interesting section devoted to Personalist Thomism, that is, the kind made famous by Karol Wojtyła/Pope John Paul II. Ashley is appreciative of its many contributions but also cautions, correctly in my view, that to avoid the problem of subjectivism, it cannot avoid its grounding in natural science

(which its adherents have a tendency to do, perhaps with the exception of Wojtyła).

In concluding this section, Ashley notes that metascience insists on all four causes in order to understand Being, “yet formal causality, because it speaks of act, and act is prior to potency, has a certain eminence in all of our knowledge. We know things primarily as they are actual, that is, as they have form; and the most perfect form, the form of forms, is existential act” (275).

Chapter 9 considers how metascience “compares and correlates” the results of the special sciences from “the viewpoint of metascientific Being” under the aspect of truth. Since logic has “a general concern for the true and the false” (277), Ashley considers it first. He begins with scientific logic—Aristotle’s conception of it, logic in Indian and Chinese culture, and then modern (symbolic) logic followed by informal logic (i.e., the kind of logic expounded in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*).

Ashley then looks at Truth in natural science and mathematics, where the objection to his approach from “naturalism” and the challenging problems that arise from quantum physics are discussed. This is followed by a discussion of Truth in the practical sciences, and Truth in history.

In dealing with the problem of Realism and Nominalism—the first of four problems that Aristotelian logic raises for metascience—Ashley shows that logic is in a way metascientific, “since it is able to transcend all the sciences and be of service to them all, yet, since it is not about the real but only the mind-independent, it is not yet Metascientific” (294). He argues that the strength of Aristotelian logic lies in how “from an initially vague intuition we can proceed through intellection to an enriched intuition” (296).

When dealing with Truth in the practical sciences, Ashley notes how the ethical uses of technology must be guided by the “broader wisdom sought by Metascience” (314). He goes on to observe how science currently explains the universe *historically* in terms of evolution, but says that an Aristotelian metascience, because it acknowledges

the role of chance and human freedom and “considers natural laws to hold only *in pluri-bus*,” can accommodate this view (315).

Metascience also defends the idea that we can achieve at least “some certain knowledge of history,” yet it recognizes “the limitations of reason” in arriving at certitude about what happened in the past and why (321). For example, metascience, in reflecting on natural science’s foundational conclusion that “the universe has an immaterial and therefore intelligent and free First Cause,” affirms that “this Cause governs cosmic and human history by *providence*” (original emphasis). Yet reason “cannot know whether this history had a beginning [or] what its end will be” (319). This concern with historical truth is important, Ashley points out, because historical knowledge “enables us to contextualize our worldviews and those of others with whom we want to dialogue profitably” (318).

In chapter 10, Ashley examines Goodness and final causality. First, he shows how finality, that is, teleology (or “teleonomy,” as he prefers), is the “causes of causes,” as Aristotle held; this includes the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic finality. In the face of modern science’s rejection of teleology (although it smuggles it in under other terms such as “directedness”!), Ashley helpfully clarifies the concept and says that this rejection is based on a misunderstanding. Teleology is not a body’s “conscious purpose” but rather, as he describes it, the “predetermination of a natural efficient cause to produce a specifically determined effect” (323).

Ashley also rightly treats Beauty (including spiritual and physical beauty) as a transcendental, defining it as “a property of Being as ‘the goodness of truth.’” He then dialogues with the aesthetics of other cultures.

In the last two parts of the chapter, Ashley first addresses the problem of evil in a credible way. He shows how God (the First Cause) never chooses or causes moral evil, but only permits created persons to evilly misuse his gift of freedom, in order to bring about a greater good. Thus, Ashley shows that the argument proposed from evil against

God's existence is "logically false and cannot disprove the arguments for" his existence. Ashley recognizes that the immense evil in the world—physical and moral—confronts us with the mystery of evil and the question of how God can "possibly bring a greater good out of it all." Our free choices to do evil (and maybe the activity of demonic creatures) are the only answer that makes sense of the cause of evil (337).

Ashley then turns briefly to love, describing how this analogical term applies to created beings. Echoing Aquinas's Neoplatonic circle of *exitus et reditus*, the search for wisdom, Ashley writes, if it is "in any measure to succeed, must be motivated by the love of the beautiful Good" (342).

Chapter 11 deals with metascience's answer to certain objections to the explanatory use of final causality in the special sciences, first in the natural sciences, where again he criticizes the rejection of teleology in modern science and explains precisely what the term means. He then looks at teleology in mathematics, in the practical sciences, and in the fine arts.

This is followed by a dialogue with the ethics of other cultures and a section on how final causality helps overcome the fragmentation of knowledge. The part covering the practical sciences, with its contrast between deontological and teleological models of ethical reasoning (especially natural law and the virtues, as understood by Aquinas), will probably be of most interest to readers of the *NCBQ*, since it features a hefty and valuable section on revisions of Thomistic ethics as well as fine sections on teleology in social ethics and teleology in technology and ecology.

Ashley essentially provides a historical survey of Thomistic ethics as it developed just before and after Vatican Council II, including a friendly critique of Germain Grisez' famous revision of Thomistic ethics. Although Ashley makes many valid and interesting points in his critique of Grisez' moral philosophy, I do not believe that he has given a fully accurate picture of Grisez' ethics on several scores, and this, in my view, is the weakest section of the book.

Ashley claims, for example, that in Grisez' theory, where a hierarchical ranking of goods is rejected, moral agents are compelled to achieve a unified life by a "precarious balancing" of the four substantive goods with the four reflexive goods—much as proportionalists do (361). Therefore, Ashley states that Grisez has attempted an "integration" of moral choices without providing a "unifying principle of order" (362). But this is far from the truth. For Grisez, this "unity" is achieved by choosing in accord with "integral human fulfillment"—the "first principle of morality"—and this choosing is made possible by the "modes of responsibility," that is, normative moral principles which guide one to choose in harmony with the first moral principle.

Another example (among others) can be cited. Ashley affirms, of course, that ethics must be "grounded on an anthropology or analysis of human nature," which is "the eminent subject of natural science" (370). But although Ashley is correct to say that Grisez does not root his ethics in anthropology or natural science in the sense of presupposing it epistemologically (361, 362), he does not ignore the deep anthropological foundations of morality in nature in the ontological sense. In contrast to Kant, Grisez grounds the natural law in basic human *goods* (not, *pace* Ashley, in "goals"). Thus, Grisez holds that ethics isgnoseologically not derived from metaphysics (metascience) but is ontologically dependent on metaphysics or anthropology.

Ashley's critique of proportionalism and its denial of intrinsically evil acts and moral absolutes is, however, right on target, since he zeroes in on its failure to understand what Aquinas means by "intention of the object" (365).

Why cover morals in metascience? Ashley says that metascience provides "a clarifying service" to ethics in its "appreciation . . . of what it means to speak of the moral good, of the teleology of moral decision, and of the difference between what is primarily and essentially intended and what is secondary and accidentally intended" (365–366). It also gives ethics an appreciation of the human

person “as spiritual, intelligent, and free, and thus ordered to God and to the community of other spirits” (370).

*From the Essence of the First Cause to the Existence of the Creator*

In chapter 12, the first chapter of part 3, Ashley examines first the essence of the immaterial First Cause as understood in various forms of monism, which see the gods as manifestations of an Absolute One (e.g., material or nature monism and process monism)—as opposed to monotheism. Second, he offers a critique of this view. However, as Ashley notes, since “Being” is an analogical concept that can have only a “quasi-definition,” it is even more so the case that we can provide only such a quasi-definition of the First Cause of that Being (385).

Ashley concludes the chapter with an eye-catching statement: If the monotheistic religions can accept modern science in the revised form of which he has argued, leading to a metascience “capable of defending the primacy of spiritual reality while maintaining the genuine reality of nature and human personhood, then they may find common ground with the other great religions” (402).

Chapter 13 takes up monotheism’s approach to both the existence of a Creator and the divine essence, the divine attributes, and the relationship between God and creation. If metascience is to contribute to a reconciling interreligious dialogue, Ashley argues, “it must not only affirm the existence of a spiritual First Cause, but must give a positive, although (since Pure Act is infinitely beyond our comprehension) necessarily inadequate, account of the First Cause” (406–407). And this he does in the chapter by dividing the long list of attributes in Aquinas’s two *Summas* into two main topics: “why and how the First Cause is one, and why and how the First Cause is personal” (409).

Both chapters 12 and 13 provide sound arguments and much insight into non-Christian religions, but I have not the space to say more about them here, having chosen to focus on the more practical aspects of the last two parts of the book.

*The Role of Metascience in Promoting an Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Education*

Chapter 14, in the final part of the book, treats the role of metascience in promoting genuine interdisciplinarity and multicultural dialogue in education and gives a description of what this kind of education would look like in the family, the liberal arts, higher education, professional education, and continuing education. In reflecting on this problem, Ashley summarizes, in effect, the conclusions of the previous chapters. He concludes the chapter with a fine summary synthesis of the work as a whole, calling for a “dialogue in the search for wisdom.”

Among his conclusions in this final chapter, Ashley calls for metascience to be developed in our universities and “given the task of enabling them to achieve genuine interdisciplinarity and multiculturalism” (442). Christians—indeed Christian universities—need to rethink “the foundations of natural science” and achieve a metascience “grounded in such a revised natural science” (443). Only in this way will it be an effective ecumenical mediator between Secular Humanism and the world cultures that acknowledge spiritual reality. But Ashley admits that the task will be arduous. This is especially true, in my view, given the sorry intellectual and moral state of present-day Western culture.

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This is a work of scholarship that every Catholic scholar should read. Apart from my objections to Ashley’s understanding of Grisez’ moral theory and a few other minor criticisms—e.g., his understanding of capitalism is, in my opinion, flawed (369)—this book is a masterful achievement. Bioethicists will profit greatly from it, as it provides them with not only a greater appreciation of nature, especially our human nature, but also a fuller understanding of its essence and the ways in which modern science can enrich that understanding (e.g., by providing a greater knowledge of health and disease).

Overall, the book is well edited and proofread (although there is some brief

repetition, understandable in a work of this nature and length). I caught just a few errors. On page 50, for example, Wipple should be spelled Wippel; on pages 518 (endnote 56) and 532, the date should be 1941, not 1951; and on page 548, the dates of the first two volumes of Grisez' *The Way of the Lord Jesus* should be 1983 and 1993.

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### Books Received

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*Assisted Death in Europe and America: Four Regimes and Their Lessons*, Guenter Lewy. Oxford University Press, 2011.

*Bioethics, Law, and Human Life Issues: A Catholic Perspective on Marriage, Family, Contraception, Abortion, Reproductive Technology, and Death and Dying*, Brian D. Scarnecchia. Scarecrow Press, 2010.

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