



GALGAN, Gerald J., *God and Subjectivity*

Roy Martinez

Volume 49, Number 1, février 1993

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/400749ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/400749ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculté de philosophie, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (print)

1703-8804 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Martinez, R. (1993). Review of [GALGAN, Gerald J., *God and Subjectivity*]. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 49(1), 166–167. <https://doi.org/10.7202/400749ar>

observed. At the foundation of this study, and present like a shadow throughout it, is the Platonic-Christian view of time as an image of eternity, and of ourselves as redeemed from time, and able in part to comprehend it, through being in the image of God.

The author repeatedly dismisses our Christian past, though never without reverence and sometimes with noticeable nostalgia. Had he chosen instead to wrestle with than angel he might have arrived at a defeat more impressive than his present victory. Notwithstanding that, however, the reader of this history and exposition of fatalism will be not merely enlightened, but challenged.

Graeme HUNTER
University of Ottawa

Gerald J. GALGAN, **God and Subjectivity**. New York, Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 1990, 296 pages.

In this monograph Galgan attempts to recast the history of the idea of being, beginning with Aristotle's conception of substance as the object of "first philosophy", through Anselm's notion of God as the metaphysical link between Aristotle and Descartes, to Feuerbach's inversion of this tendency. Galgan has undertaken an ambitious task. In fact, I must admit that Galgan, employing the combined resources of the historian's philatelic care for details and the metaphysician's predilection for propositional precision, has convinced me of his superb mastery of his subject-matter. Galgan's study, written with concision and clarity, and argued compellingly, recounts the transformation of being as substance to being as subject. "More specifically, as a report on the history of the concept of being, *God and Subjectivity* is a reflection on what mediates between the ancient founding and modern refounding of first philosophy. In essence it is about St. Anselm as a metaphysician — his meditation on and dialogue in first philosophy" (xii).

In founding first philosophy, Aristotle understood being to mean not an hypostatization, but rather as an occurrence which inheres in particular and individual things as a principle for their determination. Being, in other words, is the nature of things. In contradistinction to Parmenides, for whom being and thinking were convertible, Aristotle, in Galgan's view, maintains that substance or being, although disclosed in human thought, "exists independently of man's faculty of thinking or even his desire to thing" (xii).

This disparity between the existence of the "this" and the cognizing agent posed no problem for first philosophy since "the other", or object of cognition, was simply given, there for apprehension or observation. The situation would change with Descartes.

Accordingly, with the Cartesian refounding of first philosophy, the human subject understands itself not as a given of nature, i.e., determined by it, but rather as a possibility that can master or lord it over nature. "The actualization and positivity of what is by nature are superimposed by the negativity and potentiality of what is human and particular. The modern refounding places man *between* God and nothingness" (xiii). Galgan intimates that being must now be construed in terms of the finite subject as a *self* with infinite aspirations. Here again, a disparity is discernible. This time, instead of establishing a distance between being and the noetic agent, Descartes focuses on his conviction that the *ego* implied in the dictum *Cogito ergo sum* is not, essentially, a being of nature itself. Because the subject is understood as being substantially apart, ontologically removed, from nature, Cartesian thought suggests that, or allows for, the subject to impose itself on nature in whatever manner it pleases. The result is usually the human domination of nature.

Situated between Aristotle and Descartes is Anselm. "The midpoint in this history of the concept of being — equidistant, so to speak, from the ancient founding and the modern refounding of first philosophy — is the presentation of being *qua* being as the actuality of a creative substance which transcends form as such — a supreme, supranatural, particular 'something' or 'aliquid'" (xiii).

At this junction Anselm distinguishes himself from Aristotle's immanentism, i.e., the insertion of deity into the world as its first substance. In so doing, Anselm posits a God that is so extreme, so utterly different from the natural order that such a supra-substantial existent is held to be the means by which all beings exist. The radical difference between creator and creature which Anselm establishes, whereby the former is postulated as a "essence which exists in a certain unique manner of its own" (47), removes him from Aristotle's tightly-knit metaphysics and draws his somehow closer to Descartes's apparently open system.

This God, construed as spirit, shares the thoughtfulness or thought-imbued, noetic dynamics of the Aristotelian deity. It is, in brief, a supreme agent that is "eternally mindful of itself" (36). This means that Anselm's God regards itself eternally, and

by virtue of this special self-understanding, expresses itself non-temporally. Such self-expression is co-eternal with God. Indeed, as with St. John, the word is God.

According to Galgan's account, Anselm's God differs from Aristotle's deity in that the latter's conception of divinity amounts to the perfection of final causality, whereas for the former, God utters itself irrespective of the existence or non-existence of the world. Further, "the word by which it utters itself and the word by which it utters the created world are of one substance, for even if nothing but that supreme spirit ever existed, reason would still testify to the 'necessity of the existence' of that word by which this spirit utters itself and which does not exist as other than what this spirit itself is" (36). The Immanence of Aristotelian theology and the transcendence inherent in Anselm's mode of reflection are presented as being at odds with each other. In effect, Anselm conjoins what *is*, being *qua*, with the primary impulse of reason: to legitimate and guarantee that "that than which nothing greater can be conceived", coincide with faith. That is why Galgan can write: "We are, then, truly at the midpoint in the transition from substance to subject in first philosophy" (95). The radicality of Cartesian philosophy, however, has not yet emerged.

Whereas the dialectic of Anselm's discourse is concerned with demonstrating that a being which exists in the understanding would necessarily exist outside of human understanding, Descartes's efforts concentrate on the ability of his thought to affirm *its existence* as an actual substance, i.e., something that really exists. Descartes attempts to do this by means of a negative act of cognition: doubting. The *res cogitans* can doubt anything except its own existence.

According to Galgan, Descartes transforms the essence which defines Anselm's God into the principle which defines human subjectivity. In fact, Anselm's God exists independently of human understanding. Descartes's *ego cogitans*, too, "would presumably exist... even if there were nothing else for it to think, nothing from which it could distinguish itself — even if there were, so to speak, no wax... or any other body" (117). Galgan argues that Anselm's God as the supreme subject, and Descartes's thinking substance as radical subjectivity, revolve around the notion of truth. In the former, truth is construed as rectitude: the certainty of truth; in the latter, truth is understood as representation truth as certainty (98). The point, in Galgan's view, is to *show* how certainty can be the essence of truth.

For this reason, Galgan undertakes a meticulous reading of the fifth meditation. He reinforces the theme of this meditation, which amounts to showing that eternal essences, such as the being of mathematical entities, can serve as an heuristic device to remind us that God's essence is as immutable and established, independent of human volition and wiles, as are the *definition* of a valley. As Galgan puts it, "But when he attends more diligently to this matter, it is clear that no more than he can separate from the essence of a triangle the fact that the magnitude of its three angles equals two right angles, or from the idea of a mountain the idea of a valley, can the existence of God be separated... from the essence of God" (136). But the Cartesian ego acknowledges its finitude; through this gesture, the *cogito* establishes the implicit necessity of God. For otherwise this *res cogitans* would be unable to admit or posit that a world exists, and would correspondingly regard itself as an unbounded or infinite being.

Implied in the Cartesian refounding of first philosophy, where the impulse of egological volition is manifested in terms of truth-as-certainty (*Wahrheit als Gewissenheit*), is the attempt of late modernity to make of subjectivity a "systematic essence" (166). Galgan thinks that this effort beings with Feuerbach. Hitherto, reality has somehow been associated with reason, and reason has been grounded in divinity. With Feuerbach, however, "only the human is real since only the human can be reasonable. Man must be proclaimed as the measure of intelligibility in order to bring modernity to its consummation, to bring it to the fulfillment of its hidden task, viz., the humanization of God, the final dissolution of theology into anthropology" (166).

I have greatly enjoyed reading this scholarly contribution to the metaphysical tradition. Although I am not a metaphysician, I must admit that Galgan's study has been one of the most stimulating books I have ever reviewed. Not only should *God and Subjectivity* be read by the philosophical community, but it ought to be a required text for any course in ancient and medieval philosophy.

Roy MARTINEZ
Spelman College, Atlanta