

DOI: https://doi.org/10.56550/d.3.1.4	Original research article	
Received on: February 5, 2024	Accepted on: September 21, 2024	Published on: October 21, 2024

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AGAZZI'S KNOWLEDGE OF THE INVISIBLE

Abstract

This article is an analytical review of a recent volume written by Evandro Agazzi, namely, *The Knowledge of the Invisible*. It points out how Agazzi takes his starting point from faith to develop the centrality of reason. One of the central themes is the epistemology of religion. It concludes with a brief mention of the notion of hope.

Keywords: Faith; reason; religion; hope; metaphysics

AGAZZIS WISSEN DES UNSICHTBAREN

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel ist eine analytische Besprechung eines kürzlich erschienenen Bandes von Evandro Agazzi, nämlich *Das Wissen des Unsichtbaren*. Es zeigt auf, wie Agazzi vom Glauben ausgeht, um die zentrale Bedeutung der Vernunft zu entwickeln. Eines der zentralen Themen ist die Erkenntnistheorie der Religion. Den Abschluss bildet eine kurze Erwähnung des Begriffs der Hoffnung.

Schlüsselwörter: Glaube; Vernunft; Religion; Hoffnung; Metaphysik

We take advantage of Agazzi's ninetieth birthday to reflect on one of his last books.¹ First of all, a touching note: the author recounts from the first pages how he wrote this book. This alone is an extraordinary challenge. In the preface, Evandro Agazzi explains that, unfortunately, he has experienced a progressive decline in his ability to see, so he dictated this book to the computer. In other words, the text is essentially a kind of transcription of a very long lecture because the volume consists of almost four hundred dictated

¹ Agazzi, E. (2021). *La conoscenza dell'invisibile*. Milano: Mimesis.

pages written in a clear language enriched with a multitude of useful references to the history of philosophy and contemporary sciences.

It is truly a magisterial work, created, among other things, during the darkest moment of the pandemic when the author, confined at home like all of us, decides to dedicate his time in seclusion to the dictation of these reflections. This suggests that the tragedies of humanity, such as the one we have experienced, can also be opportunities for personal growth, especially if used appropriately.

Si parva licet componere magnis (i.e., if we may compare small things with great), Newton comes to mind, who retreated to the countryside during the plague in London in 1665-1666, in the twenty-four months of the epidemic, invented infinitesimal calculus. We are not sure if the author accomplished something similar, but the example he had in mind was certainly something of this kind: taking advantage of the crisis for personal growth and giving all of us the opportunity to think. This is the beauty of the book we have in our hands: there are many points on which one may disagree with what he says, and these few pages would not be enough to delve into them, also because the text touches on almost all aspects of philosophy. However, this book is clear, simple, direct, and provokes thinking, that is, it expands that part of our life which is “thought.” Kant attributed immense importance to this part of our life, perhaps even greater than that of “knowing.” The opposition between thinking and knowing runs through the entire book, and there is even a page in the volume where the author explicitly recalls it². We are well aware that, for the philosopher from Königsberg, the knowing of the sciences is closely linked to possible experience, but alongside knowing, there is also thinking, which is not knowing but propels humankind toward the unconditioned – meaning it has an ethical role – and at the same time prods it toward ever-expanding knowledge, often leading to the illusion of knowing. On the other hand, Agazzi goes beyond Kant and explicitly states it because, in this broad continent of thinking, he tries to painstakingly carve out a sphere of knowing³. Hence the title “Knowing the invisible.”

In this brief intervention, we will discuss only some parts of the book that have particularly struck us. First of all, the issue of the relationship between faith and reason. It is a profoundly Christian book; it is a philosophy of religion book that indeed touches on all the themes of philosophy, but its core is essentially the problem of transcendence. From the first pages, a complex

² Agazzi 2021, p 156.

³ Agazzi 2021, p. 15.

relationship between faith and reason is established. Firstly, faith precedes reason. In this, Agazzi implicitly connects, without explicitly citing them, to Anselm and Augustine: *Credo ut intelligam* (i.e., I believe so that I may understand). However, he doesn't explicitly state it and this phrase – fundamentally medieval and contrasted with the Augustinian *intelligo ut credam* (i.e., I think so that I may believe) – does not appear in the book. He asserts something somewhat different, which, if we want to use Latin, could be represented by a proverb of the type *primum credo, deinde tento intelligere* (i.e., first, I believe, then I try to understand). The author illustrates how this often happens, not only in the religious field but also in the realm of science. In science, too, we first formulate hypotheses and refine them intuitively through a kind of guess, as it is sometimes described. This process, starting from experimental data, helps to imagine a model. Even Einstein was explicit about this⁴; and compared this with the Newtonian “to deduce from experience”, as interpreted by Niccolò Guicciardini⁵.

Then, we must work on it: once the hypothesis is formulated, we need to argue it, justify it, and understand it. Therefore, after *credo* (i.e., I believe) comes *intelligo* (i.e., I understand), the outcome of which is unknown. We must accept – the author beautifully expresses this in the book – the possibility that when we try to understand what we believe, it may not turn out to be true, and we must be open to this possibility. True reflection, argumentation, and attempts to understand must acknowledge the possibility that what we assume may not be proven. This happens in science, but according to the author, it also occurs in other areas, including religion. In this attitude, we find a remarkable openness: it is a book that is profoundly Christian, deeply Catholic, but irreducibly open. Agazzi succeeds in a challenging endeavor. Again, *si parva licet componere magnis* comes to mind, recalling one of the authors we love the most, who dictated a splendid book titled *Handbook of science of religion*, unfortunately not yet translated – Bernard Bolzano.⁶ It comprises eight volumes of his complete works,

⁴ Fano, V. (2007). Un fattore epistemico inaffidabile nella scoperta scientifica. Einstein che insegue un raggio di luce. In Fano, V., Minazzi F. and Tassani I. eds. *Albert Einstein filosofo e metodologo*. Cesena: Protagora, pp. 15-31.

⁵ Guicciardini, N. (2021). *Isaac Newton. Filosofo della natura, interprete della Scrittura, cronologo degli Antichi Regni*. Roma: Carocci Editore.

⁶ Bolzano, B. (2005). *Gesamtausgabe*. Stuttgart - Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, I, 6-8; Fano, V. (2002). *Bernard Bolzano*. In: Strumia A. and Tanzella-Nitti G. eds. *Dizionario interdisciplinare di scienza e fede*. Città del Vaticano: Urbaniana University Press, II, pp. 1604-1611.

reconstructed from the notes of an anonymous student. Reading this great Catholic priest, partially censured in the sense that he was on the margins of the Church (though he had never left it), one sees how reason and faith can effectively dialogue. Agazzi's and Bolzano's books are among the few works within Catholicism where one can see that reason and faith genuinely engage in a harmonious dialogue. Rarely do we reach these levels; almost always, at the end of the discourse, there is at least a partial separation or even a contrast. Instead, in these two authors, we find a true convergence between the two instances. We believe that placing this volume in the hands of a somewhat conservative Catholic scholar might raise eyebrows. Still, in the hands of a deeply religious, entirely Catholic, and highly intelligent person, it would open the soul because the text, while remaining within the Church, reveals unexpected horizons. This is, of course, our opinion, devoid of any *auctoritas*.

The author, alongside the partially reclaimed tradition of Anselm and Augustine, where faith precedes reason, also revisits the Thomistic aspect of the "willing to believe." On the proofs of the existence of God, Agazzi employs his intelligence extensively, particularly on what many consider the most important proof since Kant, namely the teleological one. The author notes the fundamental point, already expressed by Thomas Aquinas and often reiterated, that the proofs of the existence of God are a kind of "confirmation" in the spirit of *primum credo, deinde tento intelligere*, mentioned earlier. First and foremost, one must be willing for God to exist, and if one desires God's existence, then one can navigate through the steps of the teleological proof and even arrive at the rational conclusion that God truly exists. In this sense, faith once again precedes reason.

The 'hope' concept appears in Agazzi's text at the end of the book when discussing the future and the world of the so-called 'not yet' – the reference to Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope* is clear.⁷ The world of the 'not yet' is a fundamental element of our daily lives. Therefore, hope plays a moral, deep, and significant role. This is emphasized in the final pages of the book.⁸ However, we know – and this question goes beyond the book – that hope is the second of the theological virtues, along with faith and charity. In some passages of St. Paul's *Letters* (e.g., Romans, 4:18 and 8:24; Hebrews, 11:1), faith and hope converge in the sense that true hope is faith in what is not seen (and in having faith in what is not seen, we can sense an important

⁷ Bloch, E. (1996). *The Principle of Hope*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

⁸ Agazzi 2021, p. 350.

source of Agazzi's book). However, in the Holy Scriptures, hope also has an autonomous role. Among the many passages, we can mention: "But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint" (Isaiah, 40:31). Here, hope gains autonomy from faith. Charles Péguy also attributes an autonomous theological role to hope.⁹ Just as faith often precedes reason, could it be that sometimes hope precedes faith?

Agazzi's book is also a volume of metaphysics, and his notion of metaphysics is quite bold. Today, the two most prevalent notions of metaphysics in the standard international debate are that of "naturalized" metaphysics (developed notably in the recent book Ladyman and Ross, 2007 but actually circulating for decades, if not centuries)¹⁰ and that of "analytic" metaphysics, which raises our skepticism.¹¹ The latter is based on the idea that we can understand, through the tools of logic, not how the world is made, but how it could be made. This is more or less the program of David Lewis and many of his followers, which starts from the belief that, in some way, a priori, we can say something about the world – a kind of knowledge completely different from what naturalized metaphysicians, including Agazzi, are trying to construct. This program seems to rely on a kind of intellectual intuition, in which those familiar with science may find it hard to have confidence.

Agazzi's notion of metaphysics in this book is neither the first nor the second. We are sure that Agazzi does not endorse the first, although he talks about it briefly here but discussed it extensively in his masterpiece *Temi e problemi della filosofia della fisica* back in 1969.¹² Instead, here, the term "metaphysics" indicates a discussion concerning the theme of transcendence, that is, that which is detached from every possible experience. Therefore, the metaphysics Agazzi discusses is a metaphysics connected to the question of God, i.e., the problem of religion. Agazzi aims to construct an epistemology of metaphysics in this sense, a form of knowledge that is not a true intellectual intuition, but something humanly practicable and

⁹ Péguy, C. (1970). *The Portal of the Mystery of the Second Virtue*. Lanham: Scarecrow Press.

¹⁰ Ladyman, J. and Ross, D. (2007). *Every Thing Must Go: Metaphysics Naturalized*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Tarozzi, G. (1988). 'Science, Metaphysics and Meaningful Philosophical Principles'. *Epistemologia*, 11, pp. 97-104, 229-223.

¹¹ Corti, A. and Fano, V. (2020). 'La metafisica è morta. Lunga vita alla metafisica!'. *Rivista di Filosofia Neo-Scolastica*, 112(4), pp. 911-941

¹² Agazzi, E. (1969). *Temi e problemi della filosofia della fisica*. Milano: Manfredo.

achievable without having direct access to a separate reality. It is on this that Agazzi works with finesse in many pages of his book. This is likely the deep core of *La conoscenza dell'invisibile*, namely the development of a kind of epistemology of religion or epistemology of metaphysics. Moving forward in the book, we encounter beautiful passages on moral experience, where the author revisits Franz Brentano's famous lecture from the 1880s on the origin of knowledge of good and evil, which is undoubtedly a milestone in ethical thought.¹³ Agazzi adopts Brentano's position, and another page of the book comes to mind¹⁴ where Agazzi distinguishes between immediate and originary: evidence, while being originary, is not immediate, meaning it requires effort to attain, it is not obtained immediately, in other words, obtaining it is a complex task. In general, Agazzi recovers the tradition of Brentano's school in many pages. Brentano essentially denies the value of the correspondence theory of truth and constructs truth based on evidence, according to which some judgments – or, in modern terms, “sentences” – are characterized as correct, while others are not evident, meaning they are not characterized as correct.¹⁵ A proper inquiry leads to a similar result in the moral realm. In other words, there are some moral judgments characterized as correct, while others are characterized as incorrect. There is an originary distinction between judgments for Brentano. Both Brentano and Agazzi play subtly between the two traditions of moral philosophy: the emotive and the cognitive. In the emotive tradition, following Hume, there are noble and low emotions; in the cognitive or Kantian tradition, we can, through reasoning, understand what the right thing to do is. Instead, from this perspective, they attempt to bring them together, meaning there are judgments, so the cognitive aspect is fundamental, but within the judgment, fundamentally, there is a form of evidence. Thus, the a-rational – non-noetic – aspect of both morality and knowledge is recovered.

There are also very rich pages on religious experience, which is everyone's prerogative and can only be a fundamental element in constructing the meaning of life. Religious experience is present in all people, men, and women, as evidenced by revealed religions worldwide. Here, there is a beautiful quote from Alexis de Tocqueville when he says, “Religion, then, is simply another form of hope; and it is no less natural to the human heart

¹³ Brentano, F. (1969). *Vom Ursprung sittlicher Erkenntnis*. Hamburg: Meiner.

¹⁴ Agazzi 2021, p. 234.

¹⁵ Fano, V. (1993). *La filosofia dell'evidenza. Saggio sull'epistemologia di Franz Brentano*. Bologna: CLUEB.

than hope itself. Men cannot abandon their religious faith without a kind of aberration of intellect, and a sort of violent distortion of their true nature; they are invincibly brought back to more pious sentiments.¹⁶ And this experience, in Agazzi's perspective, must be linked to the Word of God, to the God who speaks. Here, we encounter another remarkable part of the book where the theological argumentation becomes quite sophisticated. We know that the Catholic Faith is realized for individuals in the Creed, a series of affirmations often not fully understood. How many people recite the Catholic Creed without truly grasping its content, which is conceptually elaborated from a theological standpoint? Agazzi emphasizes instead that faith is not directly expressed in these statements, in these propositions, but in the Word, in the logos, which, fundamentally, is what, according to the Gospel of John, descends from God and forms the basis of the construction of such statements; belief in these propositions of the Creed, therefore, comes afterward. Again, one can see how subtly Agazzi promotes the dialogue between reason and faith. Therefore, faith is in the logos, which then justifies the Creed in its individual statements. Here, Agazzi does not open up to the mystical tradition, demonstrating his orthodoxy. In some Gnostic currents, even within Christianity, it is argued that the Creed is produced by experience, and this is something that should be avoided in a religion that, in some way, aims to be structured rationally. In other religions, we also encounter mystical traditions; for example, in Judaism, the Chassidic movement, where the rule is lived before it is understood: this way of proceeding takes one beyond a rational religion. Agazzi, on the other hand, attributes great importance to rationality: the entire book is permeated with the concept of rationality, and he even goes so far as to assert that the atheist is an irrationalist, meaning the authentic rationalist is a theist. Agazzi¹⁷ cites a short writing by Voltaire on metaphysics:¹⁸ the true rationalist is a theist because they seek an explanation for everything even where an explanation does not seem to exist; renouncing explanation is essentially a form of irrationalism while seeking an explanation in the reasons of God, even without finding it completely, is authentic rationalism.

¹⁶ Tocqueville, A. (2010). *Democracy in America*. Translated by Henry Reeve, H. Edited with notes by Bowen, F. New York: Mineola, I, Chapter XVII.

¹⁷ Agazzi 2021, p. 290.

¹⁸ Voltaire (1879). *Traité de métaphysique*. Paris: Garnier.

We conclude with a brief reflection from the author on Carl Gustav Jung's "Answer to Job".¹⁹ Jung proposes a theological reading of the Book of Job. In the Christian tradition, the Book of Job is interpreted as announcing the New Testament. Indeed, at a certain point, Job says, "Now my eyes see you" (Job, 42:5). This would refer to the Son becoming flesh. Jung – and, with him, Agazzi – adds something to this interpretation. Throughout the tragic story of Job, God would have realized Job's great humanity and, in the end, felt that he must reward him for the arbitrary trial to which he subjected him. And so, He decides that He must send the Son. From Job, one would then arrive at the Second Revelation, at God's choice to become man.

With this beautiful narrative, we conclude the presentation of a book that is certainly worth reading attentively.

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¹⁹ Jung, C.G., (1973). *The Collected Works*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 11.

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