

Raymond C. Barfield. *The Poetic Apriori: Philosophical Imagination in a Meaningful Universe*, Studies in Historical Philosophy, no. 2, Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2020, Paperback, 172 pp., €29.90, ISBN: 978-3-8382-1350-7

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In the field of Modern and Contemporary visual art, there is a technique called “mixed media” in which the artist utilizes any existing material or object most suitable for conveying the intended meaning of the artwork. Thus, a mixed media artwork can go beyond the typical bi-dimensional artistic language, extending the use and meaning of already available materials, giving them another purpose and the capacity to express something other than themselves. In this artistic style, the artist uses a practical, everyday object as the medium for the realization of a precise meaning. By using what is familiar and already there, but in a different context, the artist is able to reach another degree of reality, by transforming the known object into something that goes beyond its old, limited meaning and purpose. From this dissonance, which is created in the mind of the audience in the bewildering encounter with the artwork, another level of reality comes to the surface. The emergence of mixed media and multimedia art techniques suggests that earlier fine art techniques were no longer able to convey the meaning that this new segment of reality revealed.

If we believe that our language is always limited to what we can see on the surface, a couple of questions come to mind: How can we properly express what our imagination shows us of the world, if there are no words that can be filled with this dimension of meaning? How can we converse with others about that which cannot be named? Indeed, as Barfield’s *The Poetic Apriori: Philosophical Imagination in a Meaningful Universe* suggests, even by using and misusing the language available to us, we participate in the discovery of new degrees of reality in which we find our

place. Imagination objectifies our experience of reality with its “artifacts.” Through an act of imagination, we are clearly “naming what shows up in the world,”⁵¹ ordering the reality we experience. The doctrine of *analogia entis*, on which Barfield’s concept of the poetic apriori is based, is a theory, developed by Thomas Aquinas, for speaking correctly about the most ineffable of things, that is, our unknowable Creator. Availing ourselves of the analogy of being is the only way in which we can gain understanding of our connection with God. The mind experiences the *analogia entis* as the only relation we can build with the Creator, and thus the only thing we can know about God. *Analogia entis* is therefore the doctrine of a never completed encounter, and the poetic apriori is our instrument to bring about this encounter in-and-beyond ourselves. The poetic apriori is the theory of a special kind of wish for an encounter, made through the soul’s exploration of new realities, surpassing the limits of the familiar, in search of that which is ever-greater.

The concept of *analogia entis*, as refined by Erich Przywara, implies the attempt to encounter God as something greater than what we can conceive and exceeding the realization of any actual encounter.⁵² The element of the poetic apriori, introduced by Barfield, gives us the possibility to experience the continuity of this impossible encounter. The experience of the inexperience of knowing, pointing beyond itself in the necessity to preserve infinity. In this, imagination’s role is fundamental, as it helps us not only to have the experience of the universe as a whole, but also to have a whole universe of experiences.

Barfield does not give a precise definition of the poetic apriori as such, but creates a theory of the art of the poetic apriori, conveying its meaning through different analogies and examples. The poetic apriori becomes a sort of invocation and a wish directed towards that which is unknown, yet somehow familiar. We can thus give direction to our desire for completeness, by trying to return to the source of our own creation through creativity. In this sense, expression is the *telos* of every act of imagination that gives meaning to our existence, and meaning is the material that composes reality.

⁵¹ Raymond Barfield, *The Poetic Apriori: Philosophical Imagination in a Meaningful Universe* (Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2020), 139.

⁵² Erich Przywara, *Analogia Entis: Metaphysics: Original Structure and Universal Rhythm* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014).

Shadowing the subject and its role in finding the connection with its source are the previous theories of the *analogia entis*, which have focused on the impossibility of knowing what is greater than and beyond us, such as the Creator. However, with his theory of the poetic apriori, Barfield gives the subject the tools and the power, through the use of philosophical imagination, to keep the gate of mystery open for the new and the ever-greater to infinitely come. The poetic apriori is the theory of the subject's principal role in the continuous discovery of a never-ending connection, created in the process of conversation with the source of being. The poetic apriori thus empowers the subject and, through imagination, is always pushing to a new discovery about reality.

Although art presents itself as an analogy of reality, it does not actually fill the gap between reality and the other/outside, but is an imaginative way out to another world. As Barfield points out, such a tool, like analogy, entails a reciprocity between reason and imagination. We cannot actually measure the gap between what we know and what we do not know, but an act of imagination might help us to see.⁵³ The sense of strangeness is a feeling that “arises from the sense that there is something behind, within, beneath and above the universe as it shows up for us.”⁵⁴ Again, the gap separating us from the unknowable cannot be measured immediately with the certainty of the senses, but only by acts of imagination. Similarly, the unknown is not abstracted from the possibilities of reality, in the way that, for example, a photograph is defined by the selection of a segment of reality, one which necessarily excludes other segments of reality lying beyond the frame. Maybe this could be the unsayable, said in a low voice.

The artifacts of imagination, acts of creaturely creation, can go beyond the given, reaching the concept precisely by connecting to the known: to the forgotten and the new, the past and the present. An act of imagination is thus necessary for the development of consciousness, as it recovers all the elements for advancing towards a freedom from knowing with certainty, as certainties exclude possibilities.⁵⁵

As Barfield states, “there are two forces operating in this developed consciousness. One force splits meaning into separate, isolated

⁵³ *Ibid*, 103.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 139.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 114, 130.

concepts. The other perceives resemblances among things and strives to understand what they are."⁵⁶ The latter is what Barfield does with the concept of *analogia entis*, by discovering the poetic apriori in the functioning of imagination, through everything that is pointing in-and-beyond itself.

The Poetic Apriori: Philosophical Imagination in a Meaningful Universe invites, incites and inspires us to discover new ways of keeping our minds open for new and greater encounters in-and-beyond ourselves. By stepping beyond the conventional use of the language at our disposal, and by keeping our minds open to the truth of mistakes, of the silence before the ineffable, we can fill the discrepancies of the world with imagination.

As an element of the *analogia entis*, through imagination, the poetic apriori is able to enact an endless conversation with reality; a conversation that is always in the process of reaching the indescribable. If *analogia entis* is openness to the new, the poetic apriori is the tool that helps us keep our reality open, in order to let the possibility of the new come in. The master key to discovering what is greater than our comprehension lies within us. It is our task to conceive the object of revelation, by letting imagination lead us to an ever-stranger unfolding of our and others' minds and worlds.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 146.