
Thomism and Contemporary Philosophical Pluralism

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I have been asked to speak on some aspect of Thomism today, in view both of Fr. Wade's* and my own long connection with it. And I am indeed pleased to do so. This happens to be precisely my fortieth year as a teaching and writing Thomist, 1949-1989. During those forty years the place of Thomism on the Wheel of Fortune has changed quite a bit, and finds itself in quite a new philosophical environment and with new tasks today, compared with those early years of my own teaching. Since it is not often that venerable Thomistic campaigners like myself can be found around to tell the tale of old campaigns and still be deeply involved in some of the new ones, as I still am, I thought it might be of interest to you to recall briefly the rather painful transition period we have now come through since 1950 and then—as the main focus of my address—examine some of the new tasks and new attitudes a vital Thomism is called upon to assume today.

Thomistic Triumphalism

When I grew up as a young teacher of Thomistic metaphysics, after my M.A. at Fordham (where, by the way, I did a thesis under the rigorous mentorship of that most convinced of Thomists, Anton Pegis, for whose training, demanding as it was, I have always been grateful), and then after my Ph.D. at Louvain under Fernand van Steenberghen, Thomism was the confidently reigning orthodoxy of the day in American Catholic philosophical circles. It was the era of what, looking back, we now call "Thomistic Triumphalism." In the annual conventions—almost every one of which I have attended over those forty years—this could not have been clearer. The topics were preponderantly Thomistic, as well as the speakers, the questions, and the answers. It was an exciting and fruitful time of intelligent American assimilation and development of the latent riches of Thomism, especially the existential Thomism newly recovered by Gilson, De Finance, and others (Gilson's famous

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fifth edition of *Le Thomisme*, with its new chapter on existence, and De Finance's *Etre et agir* came out in the same year, 1939) and the Neoplatonically inspired participation dimension of St. Thomas's metaphysics, which I helped to make known in this country. What came to be called "existential Thomism" had only recently made a not always unbloody entrance into the American Catholic philosophical world, in seminaries and universities, as some of you well remember here, in the case of the at first embattled Fr. Renard.¹

But if you were not within this Thomistic circle, it was evident enough that you would feel a bit out of place, somewhat like Ruth amid the alien corn. I even remember clearly one striking occasion, when some youngish Franciscan philosopher had put forth a rather challenging question during the question period after a paper, a question coming from a Scotistic perspective quite different from that of St. Thomas. I remember very clearly the Chairman looking down at the questioner as though he were a visitor from somewhere in outer space, and replying that this question obviously did not come from a Thomistic perspective and as such was not really of interest to this convention. Thus authoritatively squelched, the questioner and his question sank back into reluctant oblivion. This was a bit much, and protests were later made, in the name of the tolerance that was a hallmark of St. Thomas himself. Things did begin to change then, but slowly. The peak of Thomistic triumphalism was passing.

The attitude toward other modern philosophers outside the Thomistic tradition was certainly not as harsh or outspoken as that expressed by Mortimer Adler in his famous acceptance speech on receiving the Aquinas medal from the ACPA, when, I am sure many of you recall, he said he had learned nothing from modern philosophers except how to avoid error. There was indeed the willingness to appropriate from them and integrate into the Thomistic system any bits of truth they had discovered or rediscovered since his time, but also the hope that if our expositions of Thomism were cogent enough, those who were still under the blight of Descartes, Hume, Kant, Hegel, and the like, not to mention Pragmatists, would soon come into the orbit of the Thomistic sun and flee those foggy swamps for the invigorating air and sunny peaks of essence and existence, matter and form, act and potency, and, of course, the agent intellect.

1. For a more scholarly history of contemporary American Thomism, see Gerald A. McCool, S.J., "A Tradition of St. Thomas in North America: At 50 Years," *The Modern Schoolman* 65 (1988): 185-206; and his larger work, *From Unity to Pluralism* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 1989).

Decline of Thomism

But in the sixties and early seventies, with the Second Vatican Council, and the general revolt against authority and the weight of the past in all fields, quite different winds began to blow, and major sea changes began to appear within Catholic intellectual circles, too. Over some ten or fifteen years a sudden and rather precipitous decline took place in the prestige and predominance of Thomism among Catholic circles in both philosophy and theology. St. Thomas as authoritative touchstone of orthodoxy, especially in philosophy, was sometimes quietly, sometimes stridently, dethroned, at least outside of the seminaries. Young Catholic philosophers going into graduate work did not so much argue with St. Thomas or refute him as simply move away from his whole systematic metaphysical approach into other more contemporary ways of doing philosophy, principally into phenomenology, often in existentialist and personalist directions. The teaching of St. Thomas still continued to maintain a certain primacy in the now shrinking world of seminary education for priests, but was no longer the great dominant, almost exclusive force it had been in the wider Catholic university and college world. A steady but thinning stream of dedicated Thomistic scholars still kept the thought of St. Thomas sturdily alive and growing, but Thomism was now just one among a number of other philosophical approaches. Pluralism was now the established order of the day, even in Catholic circles. That is the way things still stand today, with the Thomistic share slowly shrinking as it is harder to find competent young Thomists—although there does seem to be a mysterious turnaround in the demand for them during the last few years, as the desire for a return to roots gains more strength in our American culture today.

The reasons for this decline are many and complex, some of them so interwoven with the whole movement of twentieth-century culture that it would have been difficult for any one group to stem their tide. Certainly one reason was an overemphasis on the almost exclusive authority of St. Thomas in philosophical matters as though the answers to all significant philosophical problems could and must be found somewhere within his system, with the resulting lack of integration of what was genuinely new and fruitful in other traditions, and especially methods, of doing philosophy. This was bound to provoke a negative reaction eventually.

The historian Philip Gleason, of Notre Dame, has made a particularly insightful analysis of the historical process at work, which, while I do not agree with it in every respect, seems to me well worth calling to your attention. He entitles it: "Neoscholasticism as Pre-conciliar Ideol-

ogy.”² Following the lead of Clifford Geertz, he understands “ideology” in a somewhat special non-pejorative or value-neutral way: it is “that part of a culture which is actively concerned with the establishment and defence of patterns of belief and value.”³ Ideology is distinguished from the intellectual enterprises of science and philosophy in that, whereas the latter aim at disinterested understanding and explanation, the former implies commitment and is intended to motivate action. It is not that ideology implies some sort of false philosophy or some purely political motive in its promotion, but rather that its doctrinal content, sound or unsound, has taken on a new cultural role, that of supporting a cultural way of life.

Professor Gleason then goes on to show how neo-Scholasticism, which in practice meant primarily some form of neo-Thomism, took on such a role in twentieth-century pre-conciliar American Catholic culture. As he puts it:

Neoscholasticism functioned as an ideology . . . by providing the rational grounding for the Catholic worldview or collective “philosophy of life.” By that I mean that Neoscholasticism constituted the technical philosophical system that could be called upon to explain, justify, and elaborate the interlinked, but technically informal, set of beliefs Catholics held concerning the nature of reality, the meaning of human existence, and the implications of these beliefs for personal morality, social ethics, political policy, and so on.⁴

As evidence Gleason cites the Presidential Address of Fr. John McCormick, S.J., of Marquette University, to the American Catholic Philosophical Association Convention in 1929:

We have a system of philosophy to teach, and this system is for the most part fairly definite and has very definite relations to the whole of Catholic thought and a very definite value in building up a Catholic world-view.⁵

Another revealing statement is that of Fr. Charles Hart, for many years Editor of the *New Scholasticism*, the official organ of the ACPA, when he called neo-Thomism “the great fountainhead of Catholic energy . . . Catholic Action in the sphere of thought.” Even more revealing is the

2. It is printed in the *Catholic Commission on Intellectual and Cultural Affairs Annual* (Notre Dame, Indiana: CCICA): 15-25.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

5. *Proceedings of American Catholic Philosophical Association, III* (1929), 18-19.

judgment of Fr. James Macelwane, S.J., geophysicist at St. Louis University, in a critical self-study of current Jesuit education in 1932.

It is recommended that the professors, especially of externs [lay students], bring out clearly how Scholastic Philosophy is a stable, universal, and certain system of thought, a real philosophy of life, something to which they can anchor all their views and thoughts and knowledge. No other system of thought in the world has this universality, cohesion, logic, and strength.⁶

A 1935 editorial in *The Modern Schoolman* gives voice to this same aspiration to renew and unify contemporary culture with the help of neo-Scholasticism:

There is need of a return to first principles in order to bring together the heterogeneous elements of our civilization. There is need of a "refreshing" of Scholasticism itself in order the better to apply it to modern problems. The Neo-Scholastics, therefore, *must* rethink and *regenerate* and *relive* their philosophy. They must study it in all its ramifications and see how it serves as a unifying bond whereby the specialized sciences are given their true places in the whole scheme of things. . . . Only after the particular sciences have been rooted in the common ground of Scholasticism's primary truths can we set about this great work of restoring, at least in part, the intellectual and cultural unity of the Middle Ages.⁷

This overtight linking of the unity of Catholic belief and life with the unity of neo-Scholastic philosophy does indeed seem to contain within it the seeds of its own backlash—too much of a good thing, even an ardent Thomist might have warned. Gleason traces the decline of the privileged place of neo-Scholastic philosophy to several factors. (1) The upward mobility of Catholics and their movement out of Catholic ghettos into the wider stream of American society, with the new, more independent critical thinking that resulted, began to break down the older, more monolithic unity of Catholic thought and action, so that it was no longer plausible that there was "the Catholic viewpoint" on everything. (2) The opposed "unity" of neo-Thomism was itself splitting off intellectually into several major streams. Tension was developing as well within Catholic theology, not only between different schools of Thomists, but between the claims of systematic theology versus those of

6. *Report of Commission on Higher Studies of the American Assistancy of the Society of Jesus, 1931-32*, (Mimeo, St. Louis University), p. 145.

7. "Toward Unity—Editorial," *The Modern Schoolman*, 12 (may, 1935), 95. Robert J. Henle, S.J., was Editor at the time.

the newly arising biblical and kerugmatic theologies. (3) "As the philosophical and theological scene became increasingly diversified, the goal of synthesis, or the ordering of all knowledge in an intelligible unity, grew correspondingly remote, and was by 1960 effectively abandoned." Gleason points finally to the Second Vatican Council as the catalytic agent that propelled the whole process into high gear:

In retrospect it seems clear that pressures had been building up below the surface for a long time. The calling of the Council provided the opening they needed. The Council itself quickly took on the character of a volcanic eruption. That eruption, combined with the more general cultural earthquake of the 1960s, reshaped the older Catholic worldview and shattered its intellectual underpinning, Neoscholastic philosophy.⁸

There is much of value to be pondered in the above analysis, though I would prefer to rephrase the last sentence to read: "... shattered *the privileged authoritarian position* of Neothomism." The latter has far more intrinsic strength of its own than merely its role as an ideology. At any rate, for good or ill we now have to live for the foreseeable future in the new atmosphere of pluralism in all fields, cultural, philosophical, theological, etc.

There was much that was inevitable in this rapid evolution, and much that is good in the resulting pluralism. No one philosophical approach or methodology can any longer handle all philosophical problems in all areas of interest. There must be complementarity and collaboration. The complementarity of Thomistic metaphysical analysis and phenomenology is a leading example, to which we shall return later. Another good result is that the oppressive burden of official authority figure in philosophy and theology as "Common Doctor" of the Church, laid on St. Thomas by Pope Leo XIII in his famous Encyclical letter *Aeterni Patris* (1879) on the restoration of the study of St. Thomas, has now in large part been lifted from the shoulders of poor Thomas, who in his own time, as you know, was almost always cast in the role of embattled innovator. Most students when they come to the study of Aquinas now are not even aware that he is supposed to be an authority figure. All too many have never even heard of him before. One of our Fordham students, for example, when asked if he knew who Thomas Aquinas was said he was an early Jesuit thinker who got in trouble with the Pope! As a result, younger people are now able to approach him as worth studying for his own sake, and not a few, I can testify personally,

8. Gleason, "Neoscholasticism ...," p. 22.

are rediscovering him with surprise and considerable intellectual satisfaction.

Thomism in a Pluralistic Context

But granted the new pluralistic setting, what is the role that an alert Thomism can play therein, where it must now carry on its work not only with many other traditions in the wider philosophical community but also cheek by jowl within the same department? For this is now the case in most large departments, even in higher institutions of Catholic inspiration and tradition, such as Notre Dame, Marquette, St. Louis, Fordham, Loyola of Chicago, Boston College, etc.—and also now, it seems, in most middle and smaller size departments? Thomists must now learn the skills, not just of polemics, as of old—which they have always been good at—but rather of peaceful, even creative co-existence.

What are the basic possible types of relationship between Thomistic philosophy and the other main philosophical currents today? Since Thomistic natural law ethics already holds a clear-cut place among other ethical systems, I will focus principally on metaphysics (including the philosophy of God as its crown) and philosophical anthropology. If one puts the question in political terms, I suggest that the main kinds of relationship can be reduced to four.

1) There can be *competition* within the same field with those who share roughly the same objectives. Thus St. Thomas and Whitehead are head-on competitors in the same general field of *metaphysics*, both admitting the legitimacy of the great metaphysical questions and of metaphysical-type answers to them, e.g., What is the nature of the real? etc. This is an old and well-known relationship that has been with us since the beginning of Western philosophy, with Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Leibniz, Spinoza, Hegel, etc., all proposing their own metaphysical systems competing in a common forum and with recognizably similar general objectives. There is no need to elaborate further on this type of relationship, except to note that about the only serious competitors with St. Thomas in this field today are thinkers like Hegel, Whitehead, Ivor Leclerc, Paul Weiss, Justus Buchler (with his *Ordinal Metaphysics*), Errol Harris, David Weismann, Robert Neville, and perhaps a few others. Several of these might well be called fellow-travellers of St. Thomas on a number of points. To relate fruitfully, however, to such competitors, Thomists today cannot be content to stay in their own corner, lecturing to their own, but must make the effort to understand reasonably well what these others are up to, and learn to present their own positions in language accessible to their contemporaries. We might call this type of relationship one of *peaceful but competitive co-existence*.

2) The second type goes beyond this peaceful but still competitive coexistence to a relationship of positive *complementarity and collaboration*. This *should* be the relationship, I think, between Thomism and phenomenology, though unfortunately it is not always or even often the case, for reasons we shall see later. Thomists should in principle have no quarrel with phenomenology and should welcome its contributions as complementary to its own work. For St. Thomas does not ordinarily lay out in great detail a phenomenological description of the data from which his metaphysical analysis begins. He usually sketches this very briefly, taking for granted that we are acquainted with the relevant data from our ordinary human experience, e.g., the various kinds of change, the exercise of efficient causality, human emotions, etc. The main exception is in ethics, where he does lay out a detailed phenomenology of the various virtues and their interrelationships, which contemporary ethicists are now drawing upon more and more as a rich quarry. The rich and insightful analyses of contemporary phenomenology can be a wonderful complement to enlarge and refine Thomas's own base of analysis, especially with regard to relations between human persons (personalist existentialism, etc.). Many forms of linguistic as well as hermeneutic analysis should be able, it seems to me, to co-exist peacefully in such a complementary relation with Thomistic metaphysics and philosophy of man, though this is by no means always the case.

3) Then there is the relationship of what we might call *border disputes* between Thomism and certain other philosophical approaches, where one tries to take over part of the territory of the other, maintaining that it has a more legitimate claim to it than the other. We often see this occurring between phenomenology and Thomism—more often from the side of phenomenology, it seems to me. It also occurs between Thomism and linguistic analysis, often from both sides, and sometimes, at least, based on a misunderstanding.

4) The fourth relationship is one that we might call *total warfare*, where one party wishes to wipe out the other's sovereignty entirely and either take over its territory completely or perhaps even obliterate it. This is the kind of relationship that tends to prevail between Thomism (or any properly metaphysical position) and the various forms of *empiricism* still flourishing among us today, sometimes in disguise, which in principle will not tolerate any kind of metaphysical analysis that professes to transcend experience. The two parties may cooperate in other areas, but on this point there can be no compromise. Some forms of phenomenology may take on this empiricist tinge, as well as some modes of linguistic analysis, for whom, to use a well-known example, "descriptive metaphysics" (describing the basic categories of our experience expressed in

language) is “in,” whereas “explanatory metaphysics” (the postulation of something beyond experience to explain what is within experience) is “out.” This would also be true, in my opinion, of various forms of *Kantianism* or *neo-Kantianism*, often called *anti-realism*, according to which we cannot really know in any objective way the real world in itself. I would also group under the same general heading various forms of strong (or extreme) *relativism* now current among us, whether of the historical, conceptual-linguistic, or hermeneutical type (radical hermeneutics), including such aggressive newcomers on the street as Deconstruction and Postmodernism. Again, there is much to be learned from these movements in the form of caution against overconfidence in the use of reason (in particular against autonomous, self-sufficient reason of the Enlightenment type). But in their extreme forms they undercut all serious, especially metaphysical, use of reason, and cannot live in peaceful, even competitive, co-existence with a metaphysically oriented Thomism.

The Complementarity of Thomism to Phenomenology

Let me return to what seems to me the most significant challenge and opportunity for Thomism today, its relationship with phenomenology. We have already noted above how phenomenology can complement Thomism by providing it with a richer basis for its metaphysical analyses. Let us consider now the more controversial side of how Thomism can complement phenomenology. What is it that phenomenology itself cannot handle and Thomism can provide? Let me single out just two basic questions, which are in fact closely interconnected.

I. *Questions of Existence and Action*. By this I mean foundational questions of the very existence itself of the framework of interaction between the knower or subject and his world, the world that offers itself to him for description. This must be in principle presupposed by phenomenological analysis as the always-already-given before it starts its work. There is no way it can raise questions about the very existence of its own framework that it must presuppose in order to carry on its work. Questions like, “How come there is a framework at all of this actually existing world (or *Lebenswelt*, if you wish) plus a self-conscious knowing subject, so intrinsically attuned to one another that one can be known by the other?” There is no way phenomenology can even raise, let alone answer, such a question, since by its method it must restrict itself to the description of what actually presents itself in consciousness. It cannot raise questions about the basic *conditions of possibility* of experience itself. Yet, unless we artificially inhibit the natural unrestricted

drive of the mind to know, when we reflect in depth we are naturally led at some point to such radical questions.

Nor can phenomenology identify *action* as the ultimate condition for the self-revelation of one real being to another, without which knowledge of the real would be impossible. For, to recognize the presentation of the object in consciousness as the sign of a real being presenting itself, the mind must interpret the action and point back through it, in an act of *interpretive judgment*, to the real source existing in itself *beyond* our consciousness. If one wishes to raise such basic questions, recourse to the metaphysics of being and knowledge is indispensable. Certain forms of existential phenomenology do, I admit, seem to be willing to extend their analysis into this realistic grounding of knowledge (perhaps Heidegger?). This is fine, and I welcome it. But it is important that the practitioners of it be aware of what they are doing and that they have extended their methodology beyond the original strict bracketing of real existence insisted on by Husserl.

Thus we find Heidegger criticizing Western philosophy generally and metaphysics in particular for their "forgetfulness of Being," that is, of the radical "shining forth" of beings to man which grounds our propositional knowledge of them as true or false. There is much truth in his critique, though I do not think it applies as much to St. Thomas as to other Western thinkers. But we still do not find Heidegger himself ever getting around to answering the more basic question, "Why are there any beings around to shine forth at all, and why do they thus shine forth to us as though mind and being were made for each other?" For Being itself is not an independent cause producing them; it depends on them as they on it. Heidegger raises, but never really answers, the radical question, "Why is there anything at all rather than nothing?"⁹

II. *Causal Explanation*. One of the striking omissions in the kind of intellectual operation allowed by the methodology of phenomenology is that of causal explanation, i.e., explanation by recourse to an *efficient cause* or causes. By this I do not mean the emasculated empiricist version of causality propagated by Hume, where efficient causality means only the regularly repeated sequence in time of two events such that given the first, the second regularly follows. This type of relation does indeed allow predictability, which is ordinarily enough for the purposes of science. But it does not imply any relation of *dependence* of the effect on the cause either in its being or its coming to be, nor does the cause actively produce or bring into being in any way what is called its effect.

9. Cf. B. Rioux, *L'Être et la vérité chez Heidegger et Thomas* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962).

Hence the cause is not properly explanatory of the effect; it does not provide the sufficient reason *why* the effect is actually present.

This more robust understanding of the efficient cause as that which is *responsible by its action* for the being or coming into being of an effect, either in whole or in part, has been used as a primary mode of explanatory thinking down the ages not only by classical metaphysicians since Aristotle (and even Plato, with his Demiurge), but also by ordinary people in the carrying on of daily life, and is in fact indispensable there. Any questions such as, "Who or what broke the window?", "Who killed Martin Luther King?" etc. are all seeking for the efficient cause in the strong classical, not the Humean, sense. All police investigations rely on it: Someone has been killed. It becomes clear on investigation that he could not have killed himself. Therefore someone did it; and the police proceed to eliminate possible candidates one by one till they find the appropriate one, the only one that provides the *sufficient reason* required to render the even intelligible, i.e., to "make sense" out of it. To accept that the event has no sufficient explanatory reason at all, just does not make sense at all, is absurd, is not an intellectually or practically acceptable way to live in the real world.

But notice how this mode of explanation works. It begins with an empirically observable datum of some kind, which turns out to be incapable of explaining (rendering sufficient reason for) itself. We then seek for something adequate to explain it—its efficient cause—*outside* of present experience, not now in the consciousness of the investigators (the police do not observe the murder being committed). But such a procedure is in principle impossible for phenomenology as such to involve itself in, for the simple reason that it limits itself to the description of what is already actually present in consciousness. An efficient cause that is beyond the reach of present consciousness is in principle outside its reach entirely. It might perhaps describe the psychological process of searching for a cause as this process manifests itself in consciousness, but it cannot carry out the actual search itself.

There is no difficulty in phenomenology's admitting that it cannot carry on such a search by its own methods, that this is not its domain. But there is trouble when phenomenologists go on to claim, as some do, that such a search has no intellectual validity in itself, cannot be done validly or with certainty by anyone. Such a phenomenology has made an empiricist turn that needs to be called clearly in question by Thomistic metaphysicians.

Although there is no need in principle for phenomenology to make such an empiricist turn, it does seem to me the case that in fact there is in much contemporary phenomenology an implicit, not always con-

scious perhaps, empiricist attitude or underlying commitment at work: namely, that it is not possible for the human mind to transcend the horizon of experience. Whatever can be known by more than mere conjecture must be either within the circle of actual human experience or in principle be capable of being grasped within it. This implicit empiricist commitment to experience as the limit of human knowledge extends in fact far beyond phenomenology to be one of the most widespread methodological commitments permeating a great deal of contemporary philosophical thinking today. I am thinking not just of professed empiricists but also of many linguistic analysts, pragmatists, etc., many of whom do not at all look on themselves as empiricists.¹⁰ Here is a prime example of where Thomists must smoke out and bring into the open the fact and the implications of this implicit commitment and question its legitimacy, as an ungrounded and arbitrary constricting of our natural drive to know.

Heidegger is an interesting example. He insists that we are all locked as humans within the finite horizon of human experience and cannot transcend it by any philosophical effort to reach something that in principle lies beyond this finite circle, such as God. God, if he exists, he tells us (which he does not deny in his later works), can indeed come to us, reveal himself to us. But we cannot, by our own powers of reason, break through our finite horizon to reach him. This always puzzled me. Why not use a causal argument, sufficient reason and efficient causality to reach beyond our finite horizon and affirm the exigency for an Infinite Being as required to ground our finite world? It is true that as a phenomenologist Heidegger could not in principle make such a move. But why not make it as a metaphysician, or at least why block others from doing so, on the grounds of our human condition? Heidegger really gives no answer.

Curious about this, I tried to track down, if I could, just why he refused to use, or apparently allow, any causal arguments to God. He is curiously reticent about the question in his writings. But I finally tracked down one former student of his who had been in one of his seminars (unfortunately I did not hold onto his name), who told me that he himself had had the same difficulty and had pressed Heidegger on it. For a long time the Master refused to answer the question, but at last, under persevering pressure, he broke down and made this admission,

10. Thus even an analytical metaphysician like Anthony Quinton does not hesitate to say, "For a causal inference is only legitimate if it is at least possible to obtain evidence for the existence of the cause which is independent of the events it is said to explain." "The Problem of Perception," in *The Philosophy of Perception*, ed. G. Warnock (Oxford, 1967), p. 62.

as reported to me: "All right, I'll tell you. I'm still too much of a Kantian to accept efficient causality as revelatory of the real. The revelation (or 'mittence') of Being that includes efficient causality belongs to a medieval epoch of Being that is no longer accessible to us."

This seems to me most illuminating, "revelatory" in its own way. But my response would be: Who has the right to declare what revelation Being is making to us today? Could it not be that Heidegger himself has gotten locked in the past and is not hearing the new message of Being, "Look, the Humean-Kantian epoch of denigration of efficient causality is now past and gone. Now is the time to restore efficient causality to honor again"? Since Being itself does not talk in our language, it can only be we who are its interpreters, which means that is we who must take the personal responsibility for thinking out the exigencies of Being at any time. It is a cop-out, it seems to me, to lay the blame on some inscrutable *force like Heidegger's Being*, hidden behind the passage of history, for holding or rejecting any philosophical position. At any rate, it seems clear to me that one of the most significant contributions Thomism can make in the contemporary pluralist scene is the restoration of the validity of explanation by efficient causality, in particular when the cause required must by its nature transcend the horizon of our ordinary experience. It is perfectly legitimate philosophically to explain something in our experience by recourse to a cause outside of it. I do not have the time here to show in detail how this can be done. But I believe it certainly can be done, and I have tried to do it myself elsewhere.¹¹ *Pace* Hume and Kant, there are no good reasons for abandoning realistic efficient causality and many compelling ones for restoring it to a place of honor.

Thomism and Kantianism

In some form or other the influence of the great Immanuel Kant is still very much with us. The old unchanging a priori forms of understanding, the same for all human beings, may be gone. But they have been replaced by other, more nuanced types of a priori forms, e.g., linguistic, cultural, historical, hermeneutical, etc., which, while no longer unchanging or the same for all people, are still a priori for those within their framework and still, at least in their strong forms, prevent the human mind from coming to know the real world as it is. Notwithstanding his contributions to many fields, especially ethics, it seems to me that

11. See my *The Philosophical Approach to God: A Neothomist Perspective* (Wake Forest, North Carolina: Wake Forest Univ. Press, 1979), Chap. 2; see also Galen Strawson, "Realism and Causation," *Philosophical Quarterly*, 37 (1987), 253-77.

contemporary thinkers in general are still too intimidated by the great Immanuel in the fields of epistemology, metaphysics, and natural theology. On basic questions like the realism of knowledge, efficient causality, and arguments for the existence of God, his thought, especially his arguments, are severely flawed and not at all coercive. It is timely for Thomists to speak out vigorously and throw off the heavy hand that has for so long crippled our self-understanding as human knowers.

Kant's understanding of *efficient causality* and the principle of causal explanation is one important case in point. Although certainly an improvement on Hume, it is still a confused compromise between Humean temporal sequence and the older classical notion of the efficient cause as the active producer of its effect and therefore the explanatory ground or sufficient reason for it. The mere introduction by the mind of a necessary link between cause and effect does not yet restore the actively productive role of the cause and the ontological dependence resulting therefrom, which is the core of the classical—and ordinary life—understanding of efficient causality and grounds its explanatory character. To do so he would have to reject the Humean two-event, temporal process model of causality and replace it with the original Aristotelian single-event model, where the causing and the being caused are the one identical event, but with different relations, one as in the effect, the other as from the cause: for example, the cutting of the orange and its being cut are identical ontologically, located *in* the orange as *from* or by the knife (*actio est in passo*), as Aristotle brilliantly analyzed the categories of action and passion. But Kant could never quite bring himself to give up the Humean two-event model, which indeed fitted so well with Newtonian scientific explanation.

Another key example is his attempted refutation of the supposedly classical *cosmological argument* for the existence of God. Even among religious thinkers, when speaking philosophically, all too many today are still intimidated by the famous "Kantian Critique," and are willing to concede much too readily that "of course Kant has shown that arguments to the existence from the world cannot be valid; so we will take another approach." The fact of the matter is that Kant on this point has simply gotten the classical forms of the cosmological argument all wrong; he has refuted only some rationalist form of it perhaps found in his own time but one that is proposed by no classical thinker and would have been vigorously repudiated in principle by a realistic metaphysician like St. Thomas. The first part of the cosmological argument, as Kant proposes it, is accurate enough, proceeding from the fact of contingent being to the necessity of a Necessary Being. But then comes the second

part, the passage from Necessary Being to Infinitely Perfect Being, or *Ens Realissimum*, as he puts it. Here is the crucial flaw, Kant insists, involving an implicit recourse to the invalid ontological argument. To make the passage, Kant argues, we must be able to *deduce* the concept of Necessary Being from that of *Ens Realissimum*, which involves deducing existence from a concept. But he has exactly reversed the procedure of the classical argument. St. Thomas, as a typical example, argues that Necessary Being, which he has already shown must actually exist, necessarily implies Infinitely Perfect Being, because nothing finite can be self-sufficient (necessary). Hence the *Ens Realissimum* is in fact “deduced” (Thomas would prefer to call it a *reductio*, or drawing back of something to be explained to its ground) from Necessary or Self-sufficient Being, not the contrary, as Kant supposes. The procedure which Kant criticizes is indeed invalid, but I know of no well-known classical theist who proposes such an argument. The classical arguments remain in the order of existence all the time. Kant has refuted a straw man. There may be other difficulties with the cosmological argument; but this should not be one of them.¹²

The third and most important point on which Thomists must vigorously stand up against Kant concerns his refusal to allow the human mind knowledge of the real world as it is, on the grounds that all we can know is the world as it appears to us phenomenally, which is made intelligible by the imposition of our own a priori forms of sense and understanding. The single greatest lacuna in his epistemology, to my mind, is his failure to draw the consequences of action as the *self-manifestation* of being, the mediator between the real and our minds. Kant himself is caught in a kind of self-performatory contradiction or incoherence here. He admits on the one hand that we do not create the objects we know; they must present themselves to our cognitive apparatus by action. But on the other hand he will not admit that action can be revelatory of anything about the thing in itself, even its real existence, otherwise we would know something about the thing in itself. “Being” or “existence” is only the result of our positing of the conjunction between the manifold of sense and our a priori forms; it can never reach outside our consciousness to attain the real. So at the same time we must recognize the existence of the object we know, on the basis of its action (to know we are not merely making it up), and yet we cannot affirm the object’s existence in itself, because this would be knowing something objective about the thing in itself.

12. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. K. Smith (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1929), Chap. III, Sect. 5: “The Impossibility of a Cosmological Proof of the Existence of God,” pp. 505-18.

Furthermore, action that is absolutely non-revelatory of its source, that tells us nothing whatever about it, not even that it is *this kind of actor*, is unintelligible, cannot be made sense out of. I suspect that what made Kant so blind to the implications of action for a realistic epistemology is his rationalist ideal of knowledge of the real as requiring that we know what a thing is like in its own essence as it is in itself *apart from any action* on others. Of course such an ideal is unrealizable for us who are not creative of what we know. But a more modest, yet real and objective knowledge of the real is open to us, a *relational realism* that reveals to us the objective relations of the world to us, i.e. what kind of habitual *actors* things are towards us and other beings, which is equivalently to reveal what kind of *natures* they have in themselves. This, to my mind, is the core of the "moderate realism" of St. Thomas, and it reveals what after all is what we really want to know about the world: what kind of *difference* do things make to us.¹³

Thomism and Hermeneutics

Here is one of the most significant adaptations that Thomism must make, it seems to me, if it is to live realistically in our contemporary pluralistic context. It is no longer possible to return to a pre-hermeneutic state of innocence. The ideal of a timeless system of thought, free of historical conditioning or presuppositions, that carries conviction by the sheer impersonal, objective rigor of its reasoning, without initiation into a living tradition of interpretation, should now be recognized as unrealistic, unrealizable in our concrete human condition. As Polanyi as well as Gadamer have shown, all *focal* human perception or intellectual knowledge of any kind always comes surrounded and supported by an aura of *peripheral* knowledge that is lived existentially but can never be fully and explicitly articulated. To enter into any system of thought, especially at a later time, we must be initiated into a tradition of interpretation, operate a fusion of horizons between our own contemporary perspectives and interests and those of the original creators of the system, and retrieve the truths therein, which may indeed be timeless in their intelligible core, in terms of our own points of view and familiar language. This must always be done by a personal judicious use of intelligence, for which we take personal responsibility. Everyone brings his or her own aura of implicit suppositions, lived experience, needs,

13. Cf. my essay, "Action as the Self-Revelation of Being: A Central Theme in the Thought of St. Thomas," in Linus Thro, ed., *History of Philosophy in the Making: Essays in Honor of James Collins* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1982), 63-80, esp. pp. 75-76.

interests, tradition of interpretation, etc. to any text or system of thought, and it is theoretically impossible to spell out explicitly all that is contained therein. Husserl's Cartesian ideal of finally analyzing clearly and distinctly all human knowledge is indeed a dream, and an inhuman one at that.

Contemporary Thomists, therefore, must accept and learn to be comfortable in the realization that their system of thought, like all others, is subject to the conditions and limitations of hermeneutical interpretation, involving a fusion of horizons that recognizes the limitations of background, historically conditioned perspectives and interests, as well as language, of the original system's own historically situated moment, plus a positive initiation into a living tradition of interpretation beyond the bare impersonal words of the text by itself. But such a hermeneutical approach does not, as some seem to fear, block objective understanding or fatally relativize it. As Polanyi has well shown, I think, especially in the case of perception, the aura of peripheral knowledge does not block or cripple focal knowledge; it positively supports and *enables* it. This point seems to be persistently overlooked by Deconstructionists, who keep appealing to the indefinitely expandable background of any text to cast doubts on our ability to know anything with certainty. They forget the self-conscious intentionality and living skill that we bring to any act of explicit judgment. But it still remains that the dream of completeness and immutable methodology or language must be given up. In a word, Thomism today must have a new humility, a self-consciousness of its own built-in limitations. I see no difficulty in an alert Thomism's assimilating the attitude of a realistic, moderate hermeneutics.

Thomism and Relativism, Deconstruction, Postmodernism

I must perforce be brief here. There is much to be learned from all these movements as regards *caution* against the overconfidence of reason in its own unaided powers. Their special focus of attack is against the pretensions of Enlightenment Reason, as capable of solving all problems worth solving by the autonomous self-sufficient use of a rigorous, impersonal scientific method. There is no loss in the dethronement of such an idol, of what they call the excessive "logocentrism" of the West.

But once they move to an extreme position that pretends to block all access to universal truth for the human mind, they self-destruct in self-referential fallacies.¹⁴ For it is the fatal flaw of all relativisms, conceptual-

14. Cf. James L. Marsh, "Strategies of Evasion: The Paradox of Self-Referentiality and Post-Modern Critique of Rationality," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 29 (1989): 335-50.

linguistic, historical, cultural, or otherwise, that to make any significant statement about the limitations of human knowledge they *must* affirm their statement to be of *universal* validity, applying to *all* periods and cultures in human history. Otherwise their strictures might apply just to some radical circles in Paris, New York, or Berkeley in the late twentieth century, and the rest of us would not have to take them seriously. One could always then retreat to Philadelphia, or St. Louis, or Buffalo and there set up philosophical institutes and universities which could tranquilly proceed to proclaim universally valid philosophical *dicta* of all kinds. Unless the limitations on knowledge proposed by the relativists applied to *all* philosophers, irrespective of time, place, or culture, as part of the universal human condition itself, the position would be irrelevant, self-trivializing. But any universalizing of its own position must necessarily at once undermine and contradict—by a *performative*, not logical contradiction—the explicit content of what they are affirming. There is no self-consistent way of blocking all access to the truth of a careful, self-critical, responsibly exercised human intelligence. As Maritain has put it somewhere, mind and reality are in “a nuptial relation,” or, as the Sufis express it even more poetically, mind and reality “sing a marriage song together.”

In conclusion, I think it is not only quite possible but even good for its health that an alert, self-critical Thomism accept its role of one voice in the contemporary philosophical community, making its own distinctive contribution in this broadly pluralistic context. It must work positively with phenomenology, linguistic analysis, hermeneutics, and many aspects of Pragmatism, but vigorously resist and critique all strong forms of empiricism, Kantianism, and contemporary relativisms of all stripes. And, of course, it must listen attentively to, learn from where appropriate, and dialogue with other contemporary metaphysicians.