

Thomism and Postmodernism

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THE ORIGINAL SYNTHESIS OF ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

From the nominalism and voluntarism of William of Ockham (1300-1350), already adumbrated by the formalism of Duns Scotus (1266-1308), to the skepticism of Montaigne (1533-1592) and Francisco Sanchez (1522-1623), there was a logical development, aided by the so-called religious wars occasioned by Protestantism and, in the previous century, by the Hussite revolt in Bohemia as well as the lingering conflict with the Moslem Turks. The attention of philosophers was diverted to politics, economics and experimental sciences with the consequent weakening in metaphysical insights.

For St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), God is *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*, Subsistent To-Be Itself, while *being* (the object of metaphysics) is conceived as the subject or bearer of the *act* of being: all created beings participate or partake of the act of being according to the capacity of their respective essence (conceived as *potentiality* of being as opposed to *act* of being). Therefore the being of creatures is determined by their manner of being: things are unified in their being (*esse*), and diversified by their respective essences. This variety of participations is the *real* basis for the *logical* attribution of the term—being—to beings, which is an *analogical* attribution, i.e., partly in the same sense, partly in different senses. It is attributed primarily to God, who is the Fullness of Being, whose existence and *creative* activity explains the existence and *productive* activity of all other beings, which only participate being.

The existence of many beings-by-participation implies the existence of One who is by essence (I AM WHO AM) and causes all other beings to be. God is thus the First Efficient Cause. But, since there is no efficient causality without an end and design, God is also the Last End or Ultimate Final Cause, as well as the Exemplary Cause of all beings. Divine Omnipotence (efficient causality)

is the result of divine Wisdom (final and exemplary causality). Divine Law is the design in the divine Intelligence (*ratio divinae sapientiae*), while divine Government and Providence are the action of the divine Will. To this deeply metaphysical view of reality there corresponds St. Thomas' classical definition of law as the ordering of reason for the common good, made by him who has charge of the community, and duly promulgated so that it can come to the *notice* (knowledge) of everyone. A community of wills can only exist on the basis of a community of minds and hearts—knowing and loving the same common good.

THE PROCESS OF DECADENCE

This doctrine was profoundly altered, first by Duns Scotus with his conception of being as univocal (as distinct from analogical), i.e., equally applying to all beings in their formality as beings, although, as he says, they are differentiated by their ultimate formality, which he calls thisness (*haecceitas*), which in the case of God consists in his infinity. In other words, what distinguishes God from all other beings is not his radically distinct manner of being (by essence, not by participation), but simply that his being is infinite.

This was joined to a theological voluntarism (things are right and wrong not in themselves, but because God has decided so: will is prior to reason) which became much more explicit in William of Ockham, for whom our ideas have absolutely no counterpart in reality (nominalism), and the only explanation for everything is the omnipotent divine will. Thus for example stealing is wrong because God has decided so, not because it is intrinsically wrong in itself.

These differences were bolstered by the revival of Latin Averroism in Italy in the 15th century. But they had been initiated already in the 13th century by the antagonism of the Augustinian tradition represented by Henry of Ghent, who had a great influence on Duns Scotus and many other Franciscans.

After the death of St. Thomas in 1274, his *Summa Theologiae* was beginning to be widely used as a textbook. But various opponents of Thomism began to write the so-called *correctoria*, i.e., additional commentaries correcting whatever statements in the *Summa* they disagreed with. The Thomists counteracted with what they called *correctoria* of the *corruptoria* and by the end of the 14th century the Dominican friars, who were the bulk of the Thomists, had been ousted from the center of Christian learning at that time, the University of Paris.

In these controversies, however, even though the Thomists put up a spirited defense of their master, in some metaphysical questions they fell into the trap of joining battle on their opponents' terms. This point deserves consideration.

ATTEMPTS AT RECOVERY

The core of St. Thomas Aquinas' synthesis of faith and reason, theology and philosophy, is that "sublime truth" that God is *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*, as Étienne Gilson has shown in many of his works. St. Thomas found this truth in Christian Revelation (a truth of faith: the I AM WHO AM of *Exodus* 3:13-14) and examined it rationally: God is (*esse* = to be). On the other hand, creatures are composed of essence and *esse*, not as of two beings or essences or forms, but of two metaphysical (i.e., purely intelligible, not sensible or imaginable) principles of their total being.

Esse (to be) or *actus essendi* (act of being) is not a thing or essence: it is rather the perfection of all the perfections of an actual being, what makes it both to be and to be known. "A being (*ens*) is that which has being (*esse*)."

What the mind grasps is being (*ens*, not *esse* alone) as composed of *actus essendi* (act of being) and *potentia essendi* (potency of being, i.e., essence or subject or bearer of the act of being). In that composition the *esse* is participated or partaken of by the essence, and related to it as act to potency; it is therefore really distinct from it (a conception far beyond Aristotle's metaphysical range). This marks, for St. Thomas, the infinite difference between the creature and the Creator, in whom *esse* is *really* identical with essence: His essence is to be. This is why St. Thomas never used the word "existence" for *esse*, but left this most luminous and mysterious notion in the infinitive mood of the verb to-be.

"Existence," on the other hand, which began to be used after him by all, including the Thomists themselves, is a noun, and therefore expresses an essence or manner of being, rather than the act of being. It seems as though they could not resign themselves to the fact that our concepts can only grasp at a time only one aspect of the mystery of reality, never all of it at once (let alone the supernatural mysteries revealed by God) that our minds have to learn how to swim, so to speak, in the vast ocean of *esse*, without trying to enclose that *natural* mystery of reality into a concept, even though it is the light in which we are able to form all concepts. Be it as it may, this was real mutation, however much St. Thomas might turn in the grave, seeing the fate of his precious insights at the hands of both his opponents and his followers.

As we mentioned above, still in the last third of the 13th century, just after St. Thomas' death, Henry of Ghent, who was also heavily influenced by the Arab philosopher Avicenna (950-1037), thought that Thomistic philosophy showed dangerous concessions to pagan Aristotelianism. He tried to avoid this danger by means of a Platonist essentialism whereby *esse* was conceived as form of things, which would be expressed by the noun *existentia*. This term, like "to exist," denoted a state rather than an act. That is why St. Thomas does

not use it as synonymous with *esse*. For him *esse* is an inner act so to speak, not the accomplished fact of existing. With these premises, Henry of Ghent rejected the real distinction of existence and essence.

Allegedly defending St. Thomas, Giles of Rome (1247-1316) opposed Henry of Ghent by stating that essence and existence are really distinct in creatures, but at the same time accepting this new terminology which implied already the shift to formalism or essentialism. Meanwhile, Duns Scotus and his followers developed a downright formalist philosophy in opposition to St. Thomas.

By formalism here we mean the metaphysical doctrine which, forgetting that the radical act of things is their *esse* (to be), puts the center of reality in the *essence* or in the form. It is practically synonymous with *essentialism*.

This formalist tendency in the conception of being continued in the 11th century and infiltrated the Thomists, including John Capreolus (c. 1380-1444), who in almost all points was a faithful commentator of St. Thomas.

St. Thomas' doctrine had enjoyed the backing of the Popes ever since his canonization by John XXII in 1323. At the Council of Trent (1545-1563), that doctrine rendered great services to the exposition of revealed truth thanks to the work of outstanding Thomistic theologians. Among those who had greater influence at the Council are Francisco de Vitoria (1483-1546), the theologian of political morality, popular sovereignty, human rights and international law, and especially Melchor Cano and Domingo de Soto.

They all, however, continued to show an inclination to formalism, and concentrated on specific points of debate (the religious and political hot issues of the day) without trying to go back to the original insights of their master.

Among them, Domingo Baez (1528-1604) deserves particular attention for his attempt to somehow recover the original notion of *esse*. He did not, however succeed, as he understood it again in a formalistic way, namely as *entitas* or *esse* in *actu*. He continued to refer to the real distinction of essence and "existence," and spoke of the "existence" of the accident as distinct from the "existence" of the substance, whereas for St. Thomas himself the accidents have no *esse* of their own, but rather as *in-esse* (to-be-in): they are actually *in* the substance as participating in the being of the substance (which is the real being properly speaking, *ens cui competit esse per se-ens* is said to be *unum* on account of its *esse*, which is only one for each being). In other words, for St. Thomas accidents are not properly speaking *entia* (beings) but *entis* (of being).

One can see this only if this does not formalize or essentialize or substantialize the act of being by turning what can only be expressed by a verb (*esse*) into a noun (existence or subsistence). *Esse* is not any *thing*, but the *actus essendi*, the perfection of all perfections of any thing, the actuality of

being. *Esse* is a *substance*, i.e., a being-by-itself, only when it actually *subsists*, i.e., is-by-itself (God) in all other beings, it is their actuality, which is limited by their potentiality, i.e., by what they can actually be (their essence).

THE TRANSITION INTO RATIONALISM

This inability to see the radical difference between the Creator and the creature as St. Thomas had seen it (the *esse* of creatures is a necessarily limited and therefore differentiated—participation in the unlimited *Esse* of God, who has therefore created them *from nothing*, and so they depend on Him in their *esse* and operations, but with a definite nature, which He, being its Creator, naturally respects), led Baez to affirm that there is not only a “physical pre-motion on the part of God for all operations of creatures, but a “pre-determination,” thus coming very close to the Calvinist notion of predestination (which denies the freedom of man), for which he was opposed by Luis de Molina (d. 1600) and other Jesuits defending the freedom of man vis-a-vis divine causality, a controversy which would soon link up with the Jansenist crisis of the 17th century. The Society of Jesus produced a remarkable number of theologians at this time, characterized by both vast erudition and a polemical stand vis-a-vis Thomism. It is not surprising, however, that in view of the type of formalistic Thomism being taught, this new batch of thinkers should continue the trend towards a more and more essentialistic and thereby emasculated and man-centered metaphysics. Their most prominent figure was Francisco Suarez, who was to have a deep influence on future rationalism.

In the 17th century, many Scholastics wrote what they called “Philosophical Courses” in the style of Suarez’ *Metaphysical Disputations*, namely, systematic courses tending to petrify a formalistic Scholastic philosophy into a static system of abstractions resembling more and more the ideological system of rationalism, and further and further removed from the original synthesis of St. Thomas Aquinas, although paying lip service to him. It was the age of the Baroque, of the cult of mathematics and of the Apollonian form patterned after the human mind, an age of anthropocentric rationalism coming after the initial onrush of Renaissance humanism, and of corresponding theological decline: a new age of State absolutism and victimization of the Church, with the perpetual danger for the latter to compromise with the earthly or secular city.

The trend continued during the 18th century with a wider infiltration of Cartesian, Leibnizian, Wolffian and even Lockian elements into Scholasticism. On the other hand, among the Protestant thinkers, Luther’s original metaphysical phobia gave way to a more systematic and rationalistic approach on the part of Melancthon and Calvin, which led to a kind of Protestant Scholasticism, like

that of Leibniz and Wolff, more open to Suarezian metaphysics.

Among the traits of a good number of Scholastics in those centuries, as far as the core of metaphysics is concerned, we can note the following:

(i) It is considered by some that through *existence* the *essence* is placed "outside possibility and outside causes," with the implication that the essence has already a sort of ideal being of its own without actual existence. Thus, the root of the perfections of something is no longer the *esse* (reduced hereby to mere facticity), but the ideal or possible essence. Contact with concrete things is thus lost, and philosophy becomes more and more abstract, constructed mathematically, with definitions and theorems.

(ii) They distinguish between essence and existence not as two constituent principles, but as two *states*: in one and the same reality. This foundation is their dependence on the Creator, which is merely extrinsic, since it does not form part of the structure itself of the concrete being. They rightly consider that the creature proceeds from God, but do not admit that created being as such has a real composition of *esse* and essence, thus losing this important criterion of distinction between God and finite things.

(iii) Every creature is contingent, in the sense that the essence of the creature does not imply its existence necessarily, for God might not have created it. Aquinas' distinction between *esse per essentiam* and *ens per participationem* is replaced by the distinction between Necessary (God) and contingent (creature), a recurrence of Avicenna's distinction between necessary being and possible beings. It is thus overlooked that, as Aquinas explains, contingent creatures are properly the corruptible ones (corporeal), while the spiritual beings (angels and human souls) are necessary, as they cannot cease to be by their very nature (though their necessity is *ab alio*, from another, i.e., from God). What is proper to the creature as *such* is not to be contingent, but to possess *esse* by participation.

APPROACHING OUR TIMES

My purpose is not in any way to claim a monopoly of the truth for Thomism. St. Thomas himself would be the first to reject such a claim: he was always open to the truth as such, regardless of where it came from, and never hesitated to accept truths from non-Christian sources. The aim of what follows is properly historical, to report on the actual events regarding this philosophy, taking into account its objective importance, and its relevance to the humanism of modern philosophy.

Amidst the growing development of the various Cartesian branches of modern philosophy, Thomistic philosophy, anchored in being, went on its course throughout these centuries. Cultivated generally by Catholics, mainly in ecclesiastical environments, the encouragement of the Popes gave it an increasing relevance as a beacon-light in an age of philosophical subjectivism, and as a scientific instrument of reason in the latter's instrumental role with

regard to theology. During the twentieth century it has spread to non-ecclesiastical environments, to universities and other teaching institutions, and made its presence felt in many international congresses.

To this has been added an almost total acceptance of the properly philosophical medieval European thinkers, already included in standard textbooks on history of philosophy which usually give prominence to Aquinas, in contrast to similar textbooks of the last century which used to by-pass the Christian centuries for their being rather under theology, thinking that a "Christian philosophy" is not possible.

It has happened sometimes, in the last century as well as in this, that some specific point of Aristotle's philosophy, partially recalled, has triggered a revolution in thought. Thus, for example, recalling that intentionality towards an object is an essential property of knowledge gave rise to the phenomenological method. Another example is the thesis of the substantial form as the soul of the living, which has led some authors to overcome their mechanistic views, toward an understanding of the totality, the configuration of things, the primacy of whole over parts.

There are some modern discoveries which were well-known in Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy: the primacy of quality over quantity (Bergson), the real priority of the individual person (Kierkegaard), the unity of personality as against Cartesian dualism (personalist psychology), the close union of thought and sensible perception (*Gestalt* theory), the nuclear characteristics of the thinking about being (Heidegger), and the contingency of natural phenomena (modern physics).

DEVELOPMENTS AFTER LEO XIII

As a result of the labors of Leo XIII's pontificate, Thomism began to flourish in almost all theological and philosophical studies, although there was no lack of deviations.

One of these occurred precisely in the school of Louvain and originated with Cardinal Mercier himself; the so-called critical realism, the keynote of which is to admit the Cartesian critical doubt and the starting from consciousness, so as to reach a realism by way of conclusion: it is the so-called problem of the bridge from thought to things. In 1899 Mercier published his *Criériologie générale ou théorie générale de la certitude*, a significant title, as it highlights the extreme importance attached to the critique of knowledge and to the problem of the criteria of certainty. This line was followed by other authors like Descoqs, Rousselot, Picard and Noel. Gilson, in his celebrated *Methodical Realism*, has shown that realism is a primary datum, a starting point and a method, and cannot be the conclusion of a reasoning.

From this nucleus issued the transcendental neo-scholasticism advocated by Joseph Maréchal, S.J. (1787-1944). This author attempts an agreement of St. Thomas and Kant: the transcendental (in the Kantian sense) study of the human faculties and of their tendency to their formal object becomes the *a priori* basis for realism. This dynamism of the intellect towards Being or the Absolute, Maréchal maintains, contains the implicit affirmation of God, and justifies the objectivity of knowledge, thus responding to the Kantian "I think." On Maréchal depend other philosophers like Lonergan and Lotz, as well as theologians like Metz and Rahner. The latter has also attempted an agreement of St. Thomas and Heidegger.

In the last few years, in not a few scholastic authors one can detect a sort of dissolution of Thomism by dint of these attempts of adaptation which gradually recede from the sources, and make increasingly ambiguous and far-fetched interpretations of the texts of Aquinas. Thus there have been attempts to harmonize the philosophy of St. Thomas with Marx, Freud, Husserl, Hegel and so forth. This becomes possible, for example, if the *esse* is interpreted as existence in the existentialist sense, the *intellectus agens* in the constitutive sense (not merely active) of the spontaneity of the thinking act in modern philosophy; the doctrine of the proper object of faculties as the Kantian *a priori*; the *conversio ad phantasma* as the being-in-the-world of Heidegger, and so on and so forth. These are no doubt praiseworthy attempts, but hardly ever satisfactory.

On the other hand, true Thomism, which is not just simple neo-scholasticism, has effectively risen in the 20th century. From *Aeterni Patris* there has been a spread of Thomistic studies in various countries and circles. The thought of St. Thomas has been studied in its own source, clearly distinguishing it from other lines or interpretations within Scholasticism. Historical studies about the Middle Ages and their philosophies have multiplied (Grabmann, Mandonnet, de Wolf, Gilson, Vansteenkiste, Walz). The study of the nuclear points of the philosophy of St. Thomas (Del Prado, Geiger, Fabro, Collins, Forest, Lakebrink, Verneaux, Gardeil, Sertillanges, Pieper, Manser and many more) has given rise to a more clear and profound response to the various immanentist philosophies. The Angelic Doctor's doctrine has shown its vitality not only in the abundant teachings of the Popes, but at the hands of various authors (Garrigou-Lagrange, Boyer, Cordovani, Journet and others) to refute Modernist errors and those of the neo-Modernism of the *Nouvelle Théologie*, greatly aided by Jacques Maritain (1882-1973). Under the interpretation of several commentators of later Scholasticism like Cajetan and John of St. Thomas, Maritain has attracted attention as a Thomist in wide intellectual circles and in relation to current cultural issues in education, the arts, sciences and political philosophy. Let it

be pointed out, however, that his theses on "integral" humanism and on democratic secular faith, as well as his ideas on personalism, all of them very influential, could lend themselves to diverse interpretations, perhaps through not having been sufficiently worked out and refined. They have been, however, openly endorsed by both Paul VI and John Paul II.

Two authors of particular relevance in the renewal of contemporary Thomism are Étienne Gilson (1884-1979) and Cornelio Fabro (1911). Both have emphasized (the former in the Anglo-Saxon cultural area, and the latter in the Latin-German) that the keynote of Thomism is the notion of *esse* or *actus essendi*. Gilson has successfully popularized the bulk of Thomistic doctrine, while Farbo has delved more directly into its metaphysics (highlighting crucial points like participation, causality, intellectual knowledge of the singular, freedom) and has assessed modern thought in the light of Thomistic principles.

THOMISM TODAY

And finally, what about the so-called postmodernism? If what this term suggests is that modernism is passé, it is logical to look on modernism as ironically antiquated or left behind in the ever progressive march of history. I am aware of the chaotic gibberish of this statement—the type of gibberish so tragically dramatized by C.S. Lewis in *That Hideous Strength*.

Those who prided themselves on being modernists thought all the time that this distinguished label was synonymous with being progressive and up to date, having left behind ideas or institutions no longer applicable to modernity. This was their death sentence, as they in their turn would be surpassed by the irreversible march of time. The realization of this *aporia* has led to a deep crisis of the idea of progress and its gradual substitution by the idea of nihilism. Our crisis is similar to the pre-Socratic deadlock between Parmenides' permanency and monism, and Heraclitus' fluidity and pluralism, which led to the Sophists' relativism and the rise of the salvation philosophies and hedonistic ethics of Stoics and Epicureans. But in the midst of all this cultural and socio-political upheaval stood Socrates with his commitment to the truth and his fearless opposition to any form of relativism.

In our time, the idea of nihilism, of "faith in nothing," has crystallized in various forms of anarchism or absolute freedom, sometimes with a Spinozan, Hegelian and Marxian freedom as "acknowledgment of necessity," imposed by the notorious totalitarian regimes so well discussed by Henri Daniel-Rops and Paul Johnson.

The denial of individual freedom through Hume's psychologism, and Freud's psychoanalysis, has finally led, through the nihilistic moralism of Nietzsche

and the drifting existentialism of Sartre, to the more recent deconstructionism of Derrida, quite remarkably counteracted by Paul Ricouer, the most faithful disciple of Edmund Husserl.

After some attempts at constructionism in the Cartesian sense, such as those of Hegel, Dilthey, Nicolai Hartmann and John Dewey among others, the deconstructionists are now trying to devise ways and methods to unmask the secret intentions ("Hermeneutics of suspicion") of all the great thinkers, "determined" in a Marxian sense, by their so-called infrastructure, whatever it may be: language, accepted standards, ecology, traditions, ancestral consciousness, genes, or whatever. One gets an overwhelming impression of massive disintegration.

Heidegger was right in his diagnosis of the crisis of civilization as having lost the "sense of being," though his prognosis was too erratic and multifaceted to provide any sure guidance. The present Pope, on the other hand, pointed to the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas as "the proclamation of being," while accepting the positive gains of modern philosophy regarding the value of personal subjectivity.

This philosophy of being, also called *philosophia perennis*, has been "constructed" through the centuries, and St. Thomas would be the first to pay tribute to all those who have contributed to it in any way, regardless of race, religion or culture. But we have good grounds to maintain the unique force and depth of his original insight on the meaning of *esse* and how this is the answer to the crisis of postmodernism. After the dead-end of postmodernism and nihilism, where do we go? Where else can we go but back to the contradictory of non-being, namely *esse*? To be or not to be: that is the question. *Sum, ergo cogito.*