Ralph McInerny

The other day I read a little book by Roger Pouivet, provocatively titled *Après Wittgenstein, Saint Thomas* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1997), in which the author lays out for his reader the way in which, for a number of British philosophers, Wittgenstein proved to be a stimulus to the study of Thomas Aquinas. Elizabeth Anscombe, Peter Geach and Anthony Kenny are the philosophers he has in mind. That a style of philosophy which defined itself as a turning away from the notion of thinking as inner acts, the inspection of which is the task of the philosopher, toward a more externalist analysis in which language plays a decisive role, should have led to a renewed interest in a thinker for whom mental acts are, ontologically at least, acts par excellence, is indeed noteworthy. The little book seemed confirmation of the central claim of John Haldane in the piece we are all reflecting on here.

It can of course be argued that the Thomism that emerges from this *petite école* is a hybrid neither parent would care to claim. As in most such efforts, it is not always clear whether old wine is being put into new bottles or vice versa. Witness Geach's famous discussion of abstraction and the way he handles existence in "Form and Existence" (in *God and the Soul* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969). For all that, the work of these three represents a truly noble effort, and I mention it simply as proof of Haldane's claim.

When dissertation proposals are put forward, there is often an initial shuffling about while it is decided whether the proposed study is historical or, well, philosophical. There are colleagues who consider wallowing in history as a culpable vacation from serious philosophical work. Thomas put it in a lapidary way. We do not study philosophy to find out what somebody said. (A variation on Augustine's remark that we do not send our sons to school to find out what the teacher knows.) There is a springtime of the mind when one imagines that issues can be formulated timelessly and timelessly dealt with. Some never leave this season, much as Aristotle notes that the youthfulness that is an impediment to moral philosophy is compatible with grizzled locks. Of course the "pure" philosopher assumes that he is doing what philosophers do and that implicitly links his work to that of others, both present and absent. Eliot's reflections in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" on the way in which a poet becomes part of, while at the same time altering, his genre have their application to the philosopher.

If that is so, Haldane's remarks might provide points for any philosopher's meditations. But of course the situation of the Catholic

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1999.tb01663.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

philosopher is *sui generis* and Haldane gives a good account of its historical and doctrinal elements. I would like to comment a bit on the way he contrasts Jacques Maritain and Etienne Gilson and then link his remarks with those of the Holy Father in *Fides et Ratio*.

> "Whereas Maritain presented Thomism as if it were a set of timeless ideas, Gilson distinguished between the teachings of Aquinas and those of later commentators who sometimes imported their own views or sought to synthesize Thomism with approaches current in their own day. Similarly he argued that while St. Thomas drew heavily on the work of Aristotle he often used Aristotelian notions for different purposes, generally to defend Christian theology, and added ideas of his own; the most important being the claim that God is necessary existence and the source of the being of other things."

Well now. As it happens, the correspondence between Maritain and Gilson has been published (*Deux Approches de L'Être: Correspondance 1923–1971. Etienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain*, Géry Prouvost ed. (Paris: 1991)) and one finds in it Gilson's remark to a third party after Maritain's death about his, Gilson's, belated realization of how his work compared with Maritain's. Haldane might have been quoting what has to be regarded as a fairly tendentious comparison. The work of Gilson is beginning to come under critical scrutiny in France and the tide is turning in the United States as well. Gilson's Thomas is in many ways his own invention and his animus against Aristotle was surely not the most effective disposition to understand a thinker for whom Aristotle was, after all, the Philosopher. Most of the innovations of Thomas alleged by Gilson are attributed by Thomas *in verbis* to Aristotle, nor can these attributions be dismissed as pious irenism. Gilson has made it a cliché that the world of Aristotle is not a created world. Thomas emphatically disagrees, as Mario Sacchi has most recently shown. Gilson's letters to Henri De Lubac, edited by the latter without the inclusion of his own, but with lengthy comments on Gilson's which enlist the great historian in De Lubac's [misplaced] grievances against Garrigou-Lagrange (*Lettres de M. Etienne Gilson à Père Henri de Lubac, Commentées par celui-ci* (Paris: Cerf, 1986), form part of a larger story I hope to tell. The period leading up to Vatican II is clearly one of the most crucial phases of the Thomistic Revival; thus far the story has been told only by those who considered themselves victors in the Council. The passage of nearly thirty-five years has given us a needed perspective on that "victory."

Gilson described himself as simply wanting to get clear on what Thomas taught and he saw Maritain as, by contrast, seeking to imitate in his work what Thomas had done in his. But, as Haldane points out, these

are or should be moments in the work of any Thomist and as a matter of historical fact both Gilson and Maritain did both. What irked Gilson was that Maritain was loath to give up Cardinal Cajetan and Garrigou-Lagrange. In any case, I know John Haldane would agree that it is well to take any philosopher's self-description *cum grano salis*. Of these two, I think Maritain will continue to have influence because he took with utter seriousness the Aristotelianism of Thomas. If philosophers renew themselves in bleak times by returning to the sources, if Plato and Aristotle will be read as long as philosophy is done, it is Thomas's link with Aristotle that is likely to provide a bridge across which two-way traffic can pass. Increasingly there is a recognition that the commentaries Thomas wrote on a dozen works of Aristotle—mature works, the earliest, that on the *De anima*, dates from 1268, just half a dozen years before Thomas's death—are precious instruments for understanding the text of Aristotle itself. The suggestion by Gilson and others that Thomas just uses Aristotle for his own purposes simply will not wash as a description of the commentaries. Wasn't it Martha Nussbaum who recently observed that Thomas's commentary on the *De anima* is one of the very greatest commentaries on the work? (M. Nussbaum, "The Text of Aristotle's De Anima", in M. C. Nussbaum and A. O. Rorty (eds.) *Essays on Aristotle's De Anima* (Oxford: OUP, 1992) p. 3.). That high praise of Thomas as interpreter of Aristotle has come from many, and doubtless will come from many others. Now that Aristotelian studies have emerged from their long Jaegerian hunt for the equivalent of Q, the kind of commentary that characterized Aristotelian scholarship prior to 1912 is again appreciated, and no one did it better than Thomas Aquinas. To try to remove Thomas from Aristotle is like trying to remove the impression from the wax—the simile seems backward but, after all, *sine Thoma Aristoteles mutus esset.*

Haldane wrote his paper many months before the appearance of *Fides et Ratio*, of course, but it is impossible to reflect on it without seeing the many ways in which he has anticipated the Holy Father. One might dwell on the way in which both authors lament the lack of the sapiential in much contemporary philosophizing. But I wish to comment on an even broader point. Both the encyclical and Haldane speak of coming to the study of contemporary philosophy out of the Catholic tradition. In this regard, it is useful to remember that Thomism is not a kind of philosophy, one which defines itself relative to other viable modes of philosophizing. The student of Thomas is in principle interested in anything. Like his mentor, he proceeds on the hope that things which initially seem opposed will be found to cohere, if only in part. Of course, sometimes a position is flat out false, but then one will want to know why it has been held. From this point of view, the sort of thing Roger Pouivet writes of in his little book

should be the expected result. It is not that Thomists have become Wittgensteinians, or vice versa, but that common truths are acknowledged. Finally, one is simply doing philosophy but in a way that relates the present to the past as contemporary philosophers sometimes seek not to do. That is, one who philosophizes out of the Catholic tradition will be alive to the chronological chauvinism and other arbitrary narrowings that can characterize philosophy at a give time and place. For example, he is not likely to share the view that philosophy began only a decade or two ago, when a linguistic turn was taken, say. For all that, he should enter into the fray with gusto.

What is the fly in this unction? Once there were graduate programs which systematically prepared people in Thomism. They are no more. Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet bird sang. When an undergraduate asks where he might pursue graduate studies in Thomas Aquinas, what do you tell him? Thomism is in diaspora. We cannot take it for granted that it will be passed on as their patrimony to students in Catholic colleges and universities. The first place where the thought of Thomas has to be made known is in Catholic institutions. For the foreseeable future, students of Thomas will be largely autodidacts. But then, to a great extent both Maritain and Gilson taught themselves Thomism, so perhaps this is not all bad. Provided we are blessed with a few minds of their calibre, that is.

Hayden Ramsay

In recounting something of the family history of Thomism John Haldane describes the fruitfulness of various tensions: that between textual interpretation and the application of ideas to contemporary problems, dialogue with opposing schemes of thought, synthesis with the best aspects of alternatives. These are, of course, also the marks of a living religious tradition, and it is worth reflecting on the relations of Thomism and neo-Thomism to the religious tradition it so clearly underpins. First, however, I want to say something about Haldane's appeal for an 'analytic Thomism', and in particular the implications of this for moral philosophy.

Haldane encourages Thomists to profit from the insights of other philosophies; and since the current Thomist revival has been conducted largely through dialogue with philosophers in the Anglo-American tradition, he rightly sees analytic thought as the most promising avenue.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1999.tb01663.x Published online by Cambridge University Press