

## Aquinas Medalist's Address

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*Abstract:* The author begins by observing that he has often been described as an analytical Thomist. He proceeds to argue that—regardless of what school one belongs to—genuine philosophical engagement with Aquinas's texts means one should be both reverent and critical. If we are to consider the relevance of Aquinas's thought for contemporary philosophy, the author suggests, the best way for us to write about Aquinas is the way in which he wrote about Aristotle: stating his views as clearly and sympathetically as possible, showing their connection with current concerns, and contesting them politely but firmly if they appear to be erroneous.

The thought of St. Thomas Aquinas continues to exercise and fascinate the minds of many. After the Second Vatican Council Thomism lost the commanding position that it had for nearly a century occupied in the training of Catholic clergy; but in compensation many philosophers outside the Roman fold took up the serious study of the *Summa Theologiae* and the *Summa contra Gentiles*. The seminary manuals had, in any case, functioned at some distance from Thomas' actual writings, and the disrepute that has overtaken manual Thomism has in the long run served the Saint's reputation well.

In the English speaking world it is possible to distinguish four different schools among contemporary admirers of Aquinas.

First, there are the conservatives who continue to work in the neo-scholastic tradition of Gilson and Maritain, albeit in a chastened and less triumphalist form. A doughty exponent of this school of thought is Ralph McInerny, who has sought to make Thomism accessible in many works, and whose recent Gifford lectures presented a popular defence of traditional natural theology in its relation to theoretical and practical reasoning.

Second, there are the transcendental Thomists who combine close and sympathetic appreciation of the writings of St. Thomas with a respect for the importance of the critical insights of Immanuel Kant. Prominent leaders of this line of thought were the Jesuits Joseph Marechal and Peter Hoenen, and at the present time the school is represented above all by followers of the late Bernard Lonergan, S.J.

Third, there are those who follow an agenda drawn from post-modernism, among whom are the members of the theological movement that styles itself “Radical Orthodoxy.” John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock are vociferous proponents of this tendency, which has gained influence in the Church of England.

Finally, there are several philosophers in the analytic tradition, who seek to interpret Aquinas in the light of recent currents of thought in philosophy of language and philosophy of mind. Many of these have been heavily influenced by Wittgenstein, who like Aquinas stands at the opposite pole of philosophy from the Cartesian tradition which sees epistemology as the basic philosophical discipline and private consciousness as the fundamental datum of epistemology. There is by now an impressive corpus of works of this so-called analytical Thomism. Some of the leading practitioners are Catholics, such as Peter Geach and John Finnis; some indeed, like the late Herbert McCabe, were members of St. Thomas’s own Dominican Order. But there have been other influential writers of this school who—like Norman Kretzmann—have never been Catholics or—like Alasdair MacIntyre—have held varying religious allegiance.

I find that I am myself from time to time described as an analytical Thomist. I am happy to be called a Thomist if that means a person who admires and studies St. Thomas. But I have never been a Thomist if a Thomist is a paid-up member of a particular philosophical party. I first met Thomism in the scholastic manuals of the Gregorian university in Rome, and took an instant and lasting dislike to it. It was Bernard Lonergan, at the end of my Roman course, and Peter Geach and Herbert McCabe in Oxford, who taught me to distinguish between Thomas and Thomism.

There are some Thomists who so swear by the words of the Saint that they resent any criticism of him and will not accept any contradiction of him (unless it comes from a Pope, as when Pius IX defined the immaculate conception). Such an entrenched position is sometimes called “citadel Thomism.” I believe that it represents a misunderstanding of the nature of philosophy. The student of philosophy is not called on to subscribe to one or other philosophical “ism”, but rather, in the light of the varied teachings of the great philosophers of the past, to make up her own mind on each philosophical issue that presents itself. Philosophy is such a difficult subject that to achieve a consistent overall philosophical *Weltanschauung* has proved beyond the reach of even the greatest geniuses such as Plato, Aristotle, Descartes and Kant. A fortiori, we lesser mortals cannot help but be eclectic.

I regard Aquinas as ranking, as a philosopher, with the greatest geniuses of the discipline, but I think that our engagement with him, as with them, must be critical as well as reverent. In a number of books I have tried to present his thought in a manner that shows its relevance to the issues that occupy philosophers working in the contemporary analytic tradition. There are those who argue that the conceptual world of the thirteenth century was so different from that of the twentieth century that any attempt at such bridge-building is bound to fail. I disagree: I think that philosophy is perennial in the sense that many of the conceptual problems that we confront today are the very same problems as those that faced Plato and Aristotle.

Other issues are as it were the descendants of the ancient issues, and can best be understood by tracing their provenance. Aquinas's thought, I believe, is just as relevant to the twenty-first century as Aristotle's thought was to the thirteenth century. And the best way for us to write about Aquinas is the way in which he wrote about Aristotle: stating his views as clearly and sympathetically as possible, showing their connection with current concerns, and contesting them politely but firmly if they appear to be erroneous.

Of course much that was written by ancient and medieval philosophers has been superannuated by the progress of science, but there remains a substantial corpus that is as relevant today as ever. Those of us who call ourselves philosophers today can genuinely lay claim to be the heirs of Plato and Aristotle. But we are only a small subset of their heirs. What distinguishes us from the other heirs of the great Greeks, and what entitles us to inherit their name, is that unlike the physicists, the astronomers, the medics, the linguists, we philosophers pursue the goals of Plato and Aristotle only by the same methods as were already available to them.

Aquinas stands in a similar relation to today's philosophers. His philosophy of nature has been antiquated, in great part, by the swift progress of natural science since the Renaissance. His philosophy of logic and language has been enormously improved on by the work of logicians and mathematicians in recent centuries. But his writings on metaphysics, philosophical theology, philosophy of mind, and ethics are still as rewarding to read as anything written on those topics by philosophers between his age and ours.

Much writing on ethics in contemporary Anglophone philosophy draws its ultimate inspiration from Jeremy Bentham. On the one hand it is consequentialist: no form of action is absolutely ruled out as immoral, for a sufficiently imposing end may justify the most abhorrent of means. On the other hand it is sensationist: the ultimate criteria of right and wrong are pain and pleasure, conceived as private experiences. It follows that animals belong to the same moral community as humans, because they like us can feel pain and pleasure. Fetuses, however, do not, since they are incapable of feeling either.

Aquinas's ethics stands in splendid contrast to this noxious utilitarianism. While the calculation of consequences has its place in his system, this is within a framework which rules out certain actions as absolutely forbidden. It is rationality, not sensation, that is the mark of human beings, so that animals form no part of our moral community. A creature's potentialities, no less than its experiences, are relevant to the evaluation of its moral worth, and they should be our guide in deciding how to treat a fetus.

Only Aquinas's fellow Christians can endorse the whole of Aquinas's ethical system, with its emphasis on theological as well as moral virtues. But his treatment of the moral virtues, and his analysis of human actions and intentions, commends itself to secular as well as to religious readers. This is unsurprising, since much of the ethical parts of the *Summa Theologiae* read like a commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* of the pagan Aristotle.

The first book that I wrote on Aquinas, *The Five Ways* (1969), was a discussion of the proofs of God's existence to be found at the beginning of the *Summa Theologiae*. I concluded that none of them achieved its object. I continue to believe this, but I now think that it might have been better to concentrate my attention on the *Summa contra Gentiles* as Norman Kretzmann later did in his magisterial *The Metaphysics of Theism*.

Later I was invited to write a brief introduction to Aquinas in the Oxford series *Past Masters* (1969). The book contained three chapters, the first a summary of the Saint's life and works, the second devoted to Being and the third to Mind. I argued that St. Thomas's philosophical psychology was equal to anything currently on the philosophical market, but I took a critical view of the real distinction between essence and existence and the thesis that God was self-subsistent being.

Later I expanded each of these judgements in full-length books. In *Aquinas on Mind* (1993), I spelt out that for Aquinas the intellect is the capacity for thought, for the particular kind of thought peculiar to language-users. The agent intellect, or concept-forming ability is species-specific in humans; the receptive intellect is the set of concepts and beliefs possessed by an individual. Aquinas's account places him between empiricists who regard ideas as arising simply from experience, and rationalists who postulate innate ideas. He also stands in the middle between realists and idealists. He agrees with the realists that the human mind is capable of genuine knowledge of an extra-mental world. But he agrees with the idealists that the universals that the mind uses to conceptualise experience have no existence, as universals, outside the mind. His map of the mind is a complicated one but it is superior to that offered by many another famous philosopher.

My attitude to Aquinas's metaphysics is an ambiguous one. There run through his works two grand Aristotelian principles. The first is that there is no actualisation without individuation; the second is that there is no individuation without actualisation. The first principle is anti-Platonic; the second, anachronistically, we can call anti-Leibnizian. These principles seem to me to be fundamental to any sound ontology, and they are key elements of Aquinas's philosophy of creation.

But if Aquinas is an Aristotelian on earth, he is a Platonist in heaven. I argued in *Aquinas on Being* (2002) that the idea of God as pure Being is vulnerable to all the arguments that can be brought against Plato's theory of Ideas, and that the distinction between essence and existence embodies a deep philosophical confusion between different senses of the verb "to be." That book, not unnaturally, attracted a hail of criticism from citadel Thomists.

It is, therefore, highly magnanimous of the American Catholic Philosophical Association to award me the Aquinas medal. I value it highly not only because my admiration of Aquinas's gigantic achievement far outweighs my criticism of aspects of his apparatus, but also because it is an honour to be enrolled in the same company as those distinguished scholars and philosophers who have won the medal in the past. I am most grateful to you all and offer you my warmest thanks.

I must end, however, on a note of caution. You will remember that shortly after his death a number of Aquinas's teachings incurred academic and ecclesiastical

sanction. On March 7, 1277, they were condemned by Bishop Tempier in Paris and ten days later by a special congregation of the university of Oxford. The Oxford condemnation specified that those who taught the Thomist theses were to be allowed forty days to recant, and if they continued to uphold them they were to be deprived of their degrees.

The Paris condemnation was revoked two years after the Saint's canonization. The Oxford one, so far as I know, has never been withdrawn. So when I get back to Oxford I had better not boast of having received the Aquinas medal, for fear of losing my M.A.

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