IN MEMORIAM: RALPH MCINERNY (1929-2010)

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I was asked to provide some reminiscences of Ralph McInerny, who was on my philosophy dissertation committee at the University of Notre Dame some twenty years ago. A leading and highly published Thomist and commentator, he was a professor of philosophy and medieval studies at Notre Dame, where he became a faculty member in 1955 and served as director of the Medieval Institute and the Jacques Maritain Center. In addition to his academic writings, he wrote more than 80 novels. How does one take the measure of such a person?

Back then students would refer to him as Dr. McInerny, but in an appreciative vein I will refer to him as Ralph. Aside from enabling one to reminisce, a memorial of Ralph gives an opportunity to reflect on how he approached philosophy and how to perpetuate this approach.

In addition to being a prolific writer of fiction, Ralph was a consummate scholar and humanist: urbane, well-read to a fault, and with a devastatingly funny dry wit. In a profession often marred by unnecessarily lacerative and self-serving give-and-take and a pathetic obeisance to agendas defined by the Ivy League and Oxbridge, Ralph stood out as a philosopher solely interested in what was most important: exploring truth, for truth’s sake.

When it came to learning medieval philosophy, he was intent on getting others on board for the fun of the ride. Philosophy for him was a communal enterprise. Generations of students will have their own stories. He generously took pains to get me situated by introducing a timeline of the medieval period, providing a tour of the Medieval Institute’s holdings, inviting me to a Latin study group, and supplying a bibliography.

I had somehow taken an interest in Suarez’s philosophy; despite his ingrained Thomism, Ralph took it in good stride. (I can hear him saying, “We are all Suarezians now!”) It was remarkable how facile and reflexive it was for him to rattle off a thumbnail account of scholastic action theory, as if it were second nature, and what a glimpse this provided of not just how much has been lost in contemporary philosophy but of what a different conceptual system Ralph moved in. This system was tied to everyday life. One of the most helpful exegetical points he made was in response to my confusion about how to parse scholastic terminology. His advice was to start by investing it with the commonsensical meaning the terms have in everyday language. No
arcane and inaccessible vocabulary here. Always start with the familiar, with what we know, in good Aristotelian fashion.

As a Thomist, Ralph was committed to a thoroughgoing ontological and moral realism. His philosophical perspective placed him outside the ambit of the dominant paradigm of philosophy in the United States, with its hyper-professionalism, Cartesian vortices, and idiosyncratic and fleeting fashions. (One can imagine a Ralph perpetually perplexed by the redundancy of the phrase “analytical philosophy,” or perhaps likewise bemused by the emergence of “analytical Thomism”).

Moreover, and most importantly, Ralph realized better than most that philosophical distinctions should be made not to dazzle with their technical virtuosity, but to edify. Philosophy has something crucial to do with how we should live our lives or understand and live our faith.

Persons wanting an autobiographical account should read I Alone Have Escaped to Tell You. (It, and Gary Wills’ Bare Ruined Choirs, help to reconstruct the lost world of Catholicism in America, though Wills went in a direction different from Ralph). Ralph comments in his autobiography on the current state of philosophy in these words: “Those in the soi-disant mainstream are not philosophizing in an alternative and legitimate way but are involved in a deep incoherence, and not just from some other and alien point of view, but on the terms they themselves accept. By contrast, the way I do philosophy is not just a way of doing philosophy; it is philosophy. And it isn’t my way, it’s ours. Perhaps the most annoying claim of all is that those who allegedly reject this common wisdom of the human race surreptitiously invoke it, thereby displaying that they have not hit upon some radical alternative to it” (p. 92).

The contemporary approach mars philosophical pedagogy. As Ralph put it in his autobiography, “an introductory course in philosophy, just about anywhere over the last fifty years, would have sent me fleeing” (p. 92). At Notre Dame—and presumably nothing has changed since I was there—students in introductory courses were often (not always, fortunately) merely exposed to a wide variety of philosophical perspectives. There was little in many of these courses that distinctively had to do with the Catholic tradition and how the pieces of that tradition fit together. One of my Protestant friends hit the nail on the head when in effect he asked, “With all this perspectivism, aren’t we just cultivating skepticism among the students? In other words, isn’t this downright corrosive?” It is not any wonder that so many students will graduate with nothing more than a “cafeteria of ideas” attitude toward philosophy.
Reflecting on Ralph’s life and work thus provides an opportunity to ask how might a graduate education prepare young scholars to approach philosophy as he did? In his autobiography, Ralph describes the training he received at Laval: “The method … was almost exclusively to read the texts of Thomas, and this meant chiefly the commentaries on Aristotle…only when Thomas’s thought had become second nature would comparisons be possible” (p. 94). It resonated strongly with the formation that a Dominican, then the head of the Leonine Commission, had received and described to me in a memorable conversation over supper (near the Vatican, aptly). Such an approach can provide an intellectual formation that will bear fruit throughout an entire career, whatever one does.

Thinking about Ralph’s approach to philosophy leads one to ask how this approach might be sustained and encouraged. The fractured pedagogy of the typical analytical philosophy graduate program does not lend itself to learning Thomism in a systematic way. By contrast, the ideal would be a graduate education, offered within philosophy departments at Catholic universities, consisting of a two-year boot camp immersion in all aspects of the thought of Aquinas, plus Aristotle’s thought as presented in Thomistic commentaries. (The ability to read Aquinas’s Latin would be an entry requirement.) Primacy would be placed on learning thoroughly both Aquinas and Aristotle, with emphasis on reconstructing the interrelationships of aspects of what they have to say, but with a great deal of rigorous critical discussion encouraged along the way, including (as a side piece) passing discussion about how their thought differs in crucial ways from that of other figures in the history of philosophy. This would be followed by the opportunity to do specialist studies in some area, for example in philosophy of science, ethics, metaphysics, or history of modern philosophy, in which one would be expected to critically evaluate these fields from a Thomistic or broadly scholastic perspective. Finally, one would write a dissertation on the topic of one’s choosing, informed by the rich background one has received. If one wanted to write a dissertation about some aspect of contemporary Anglo or continental philosophy, so be it. At least one would do so having had an intense exposure to the Thomistic tradition, which has played such a profound role in shaping Catholic thought.

It is hard to imagine a better preparation for professors who will be teaching at Catholic colleges and universities, who can then responsibly convey the intellectual heritage of that tradition. Likewise, it is hard to imagine a better preparation to think systematically about relationships between disparate areas of philosophy and to cultivate the
skill not only to think analytically, crucial as that is, but also analogically and in terms of parts and wholes. One can, of course, pick up Thomism outside graduate school, but what better place to learn its craft and approaches, early on and systematically, within a community of other interested individuals?

Many budding social scientists, including those who will eventually become members of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists, would benefit from a truncated version of such a course of study. The rigor and training of such a program would give them a methodology and philosophical formation before launching on graduate studies in their various specialties. It would prepare them to approach in a critical way the very often problematic paradigms and assumptions to which they will later be exposed. So too would such a course of study benefit aspiring theologians, though in the present climate this suggestion would not be well received in many, quite possibly most, quarters.

Some persons enamored of analytic philosophy will regard the pedagogical approach suggested above as cultivating a sort of philosophical fundamentalism and an obsequious attachment to the thought of a few thinkers. Or they will worry that it would fixate on “text scholarship” at the expense of developing one’s critical faculties by reading currently popular philosophers. The criticism is disingenuous. After all, so-called analytic philosophy has its own textual canon, and its own vocabulary (though subject to the prevailing rages and therefore transitory) that its practitioners are expected to know intimately. Most of the tedious and convoluted writings of contemporary philosophy will soon be forgotten. By contrast, Aquinas’s work, and the tradition that emanates from it, have been with us for hundreds of years and show no sign of vanishing into oblivion, even if this tradition does not reflect the hegemonic mode of philosophizing. There must be a reason why this is so.

Turning now from reflections on how study of Aquinas can be perpetuated, I want to close with some broader but related comments. One of Ralph’s essays, “Band of Fathers,” written in the fall of 2009, nostalgically recalls his days at Nazareth Hall in Minnesota, a preparatory school for the priesthood that provided a classically influenced education. Of “that place, those years, that curriculum,” he says, “I cannot imagine who I would be without them.” The essay depicts a curiously evocative image of the rector, a priest, ice-skating outside the school: “a solitary figure, clad all in black…in the waning light of a winter afternoon…performing intricate arabesques on a frozen lake,” and concludes with a note that “you cannot skate twice on the same lake.” Likely Ralph was suggesting that, “that place, those years, that
“curriculum” will never be seen again. Similarly, he realized that the University of Notre Dame, not to mention the church in America, of which it is a microcosm and mirror, will never again return to the way it once was.

Confusion, dissension, skepticism, dithering—ultimately, a failure of confidence—reign in much of so-called Catholic higher education. Perhaps this comes as no surprise. Taking the big view, Ralph once mentioned, in relation to Vatican II, it takes a lot of time for the full implications of a council to work itself out. Despite the chaos of the present, or perhaps more accurately, because of it, it is important for Catholic scholars to immerse themselves in the intellectual tradition that Ralph championed and to forge ahead in explaining its perennial relevance to the present.

References:
