

To Be a Thomist*

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THE WORK of St. Thomas Aquinas is in the public domain. To be interested in it, then, one does not have to belong to an approved association or pass through a specific rite of initiation. Any Tom, Dick, and Harry can read St. Thomas, in Latin, French, or English—and even enjoy doing so—without, however, professing himself a Thomist. To be a Thomist, then, means more than reading St. Thomas, even devotedly. It means taking St. Thomas as one's teacher.

A Master

Toward the outset of the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes explains how, disoriented by the multiplicity of philosophical traditions, he decided that, “as for the opinions which up to that time I had embraced, I thought that I could not do better than resolve at once to sweep them wholly away” in order later to “be in a position to admit . . . others more correct,” building on foundations entirely his own rather than “upon old foundations.” He was in fact naively convinced that “the sciences contained in books . . . are farther removed from truth than the simple inferences which a man of good sense using his natural and unprejudiced judgment draws respecting the matters of his experience.”¹

Nothing is more opposed to St. Thomas's traditionalist humanism (and indeed, to the authentic spirit of Christian thought) than this disarming rationalist naiveté. For St. Thomas, one can engage in the work of thinking

* Originally: “Être thomiste,” in *Thomistes, ou De l'actualité de saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Éditions Parole et Silence, 2003), 15–26. Translation by Thérèse Scarpelli Cory.

¹ *Discourse on Method*, 2.1, trans. John Veitch (London: Walter Dunne, 1901).

only from within a tradition which provides a context steeped in meaning. This is eminently true for theology, as the *intellectus fidei* and rational pondering of the Word of God, but it is also true for philosophy:

Thought is [first of all] exegesis and reading. The philosophical act is indeed primarily a relation to the thing itself, but only from within the heart of a precomprehension which is culturally and theologically determined in the shape of a tradition, through which reason enters into a relation with that thing.²

Unlike Descartes, who begins by isolating himself (physically, by shutting himself into his “heated room,” and culturally, by branding all tradition as suspect), St. Thomas deliberately immerses himself in Tradition. He was reportedly eager to gain access to texts that could place him in contact with the thought of the ancients; the very structure of his own works (beginning with his numerous commentaries) shows that he thinks in connection with his predecessors; he gleans from everyone, even from his adversaries, the smallest trace of that truth which is the work of the Spirit regardless of who articulates it, according to the famous formula in the *Ambrosiaster*. In short, St. Thomas is a *Scholastic*; and Scholasticism, as indicated by its name, develops in the laboratories of tradition—the schools.

Like Descartes, of course, St. Thomas knows that the ultimate goal of all thought is the truth of things, that is, the intellect’s conformity to reality, not to books. “The study of philosophy does not have for its goal the knowledge of what others have thought, but the truth of things.”³ But individual reason can apprehend the truth of things only with difficulty: hence its interest in the “science of books,” its assiduous study of “what others have thought”! However personal the search for truth, especially fundamental truths, may be, it is never an isolated undertaking, a private encounter between the individual reason and the real. It is a communal and social undertaking. Furthermore, for St. Thomas, the only definitive goal of political life, life in the City, is to permit each member to pursue the knowledge of truth which defines a person’s happiness “here below.” Natural contemplation is inseparable from the overall structure of society, which must seek to create favorable conditions for *studium*, an essential element in the common political good. Not only socio-economic conditions such as peace and a certain degree of prosperity are necessary, but also and above all, properly human conditions such as the possibility of teaching and engaging in intellectual exchange.

² G. Prouvost, *Étienne Gilson—Jacques Maritain: deux approches de l’être* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1991), 295.

³ St. Thomas, *In de caelo* I, lect. 22, no. 8.

The social dimension of the intellectual life is not only synchronic but also diachronic and historical. Each generation contributes in its own way to the progress of human knowledge (although regression can happen). St. Thomas likes to compare the general and increasingly “specific” progress of human knowledge to the development that takes place in each person. Thus in the *Summa theologiae*, he explains that the ancient philosophers entered “little by little and as though step by step (*paulatim et quasi pedentatim*)”⁴ into knowledge of the fundamental truth about the origin of things, by proceeding from sensible causes to the highest and most illuminating intelligible causes. Wisdom is therefore a collective effort toward the truth, which each generation must re-actualize, beginning with a respectful examination of the inheritance left by preceding generations. “When each of our predecessors has discovered something about the truth and has gathered it together into one whole, he leads his followers to a more extensive knowledge of truth.”⁵ St. Thomas holds that we should even be grateful in some way to those who fell into error, because their errors indirectly benefited the general process of searching for truth.⁶

Thus, for better or for worse, I can encounter the truth of things only through the mediation of a tradition, that is, a history. This relationship with history as a path toward truth is constitutive of the Scholastic approach that St. Thomas employs. In other words, the structure of human thought is fundamentally *traditionalist*, in the sense that the human person is humanized and reaches personal knowledge of the truth from within a tradition of wisdom conveyed by a determinate community.

The opposition between Scholastic traditionalism and individualism rests on a deep anthropological conflict, and Maritain was probably right to denounce Cartesianism in its various manifestations as an acute form of angelism. A dualist anthropology like Descartes’, which juxtaposes consciousness and corporeality, spontaneously tends toward abstract universalism, that is, toward disconnecting reason from the corporeality and concrete historical roots that reason implies. Moreover, such an anthropology can conceive of the work of reason only as an emancipation from a supposedly contingent, and thus rationally impure, tradition. Likewise, it is angelism to believe that our supposedly clear and distinct ideas, like the divine ideas, directly grasp the real. Indeed, our concepts, laboriously distilled from a historically situated experience, reach an account of the real only through a strenuous program of recomposition and conversion.

⁴ *ST* I, q. 44, a. 2.

⁵ St. Thomas, *In Metaph.* II, lect. 1, no. 287.

⁶ *Ibid.*, XII, lect. 9, no. 2655.

In fact, for St. Thomas, the human mind is neither divine nor angelic. It is the last in a hierarchy of intellects, and this position is the key to the ultimate explanation for the properties of the human being. As the last of the intellects, the human intellect is neither a pure subsisting act of intellection, like God Who is "thought from thought," nor a power actualized from its creation by co-created forms, like the angels. It is in pure potency to the intelligible ideas or forms: it is a "clean slate (*tabula rasa*)," as Aristotle said, just as prime matter is in pure potency to the "natural" or physical forms. It must therefore receive determinations from outside itself. As pure potency in the intellectual order, the human intellect can only pass *progressively* from its initial potency to the full actuation of its intellectual capacity. It journeys from an originally confused knowledge toward a more and more precise, determinate, and perfect knowledge. In short, it has a "history." Furthermore, insofar as it is the last of the intellects, the human intellect is the weakest as regards its operative power. Depending on whether an intellect is more or less powerful, it extracts or assimilates the intelligible content of a universal form more or less completely, and it is more or less able to derive an accurate knowledge therefrom. Thus if the human intellect had access only to general intelligible forms, as the angels do, then, on account of its weakness, it could derive from them only a confused and very imperfect knowledge. It thus needs an object proportioned to its weak capacity: not the very general intelligible forms, but those more particular forms which are the essences of the sensible things surrounding us, and which spell out for us the inaccessible perfections of the spiritual world. But since these essences are immanent to the corporeal world and can actualize the possible intellect only after a process of spiritualization, the mediation of sensible knowledge is necessary. The union of the human intellect with the body, which enables sensation and contact with the sensible, is thus neither an accident nor a curse, but the natural condition of human knowledge. Moreover, a knowledge which originates in experience is necessarily partial: objective, realist—but still partial. In fact, both the sensible object and my perception of that object are particularized. The abstract concept itself, developed from the starting point of sensible experience, retains something of its origins: it is not a pure copy of the divine ideas, but a slow and arduous construct which allows for only a very partial knowledge, even on the *few* occasions when it does attain the essence of things. (St. Thomas says that, practically speaking, one cannot know even the essence of a fly.) This partial and thus imperfect character of our personal knowledge explains the necessity for a common sharing, for a tradition.

The human *modus intelligendi* thus reveals man's paradoxical position in the created universe: he stands at the crossroads between the spiritual

world and the corporeal world. He is an incarnate spirit, rooted in the particular and open to the universal. The traditionalist structure of human thought expresses this twofold membership.

Thus the first step the truth-seeking soul must take is, not to make itself a *tabula rasa*, but instead to place its trust in the traditions of wisdom from within which the soul is open to personal reflection. Each new acquisition of knowledge presupposes at heart an act of trust in our teachers. "He who learns must begin by believing," Aristotle states. Following in the footsteps of *Fides et Ratio* (§§31–33), one cannot emphasize strongly enough the degree to which the disposition of believing accords with human nature, with the result that the traditionalist way of thinking is much more humanizing than the individual search for subjective evidence. The act of believing, which is at the heart of all cultural life, is indeed paradoxical:

The knowledge acquired through belief can seem an imperfect form of knowledge, to be perfected gradually through personal accumulation of evidence; on the other hand, belief is often humanly richer than mere evidence, because it involves an interpersonal relationship and brings into play not only a person's capacity to know but also the deeper capacity to entrust oneself to others, to enter into a relationship with them which is intimate and enduring.⁷

This is why truth

is attained not only by way of reason but also through trusting acquiescence to other persons who can guarantee the authenticity and certainty of the truth itself. There is no doubt that the capacity to entrust oneself and one's life to another person and the decision to do so are among the most significant and expressive human acts.⁸

To be a Thomist, then, is to trust Aquinas to lead us to an understanding of the real, toward wisdom. Faced with a plethora of possible teachers, the philosopher-apprentice must make a choice. Descartes could not commit to this profoundly human act:

I could, however, select from the crowd no one whose opinions seemed worthy of preference, and thus I found myself constrained, as it were, to use my own reason in the conduct of my life.⁹

⁷ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, §32.

⁸ *Ibid.*, §33.

⁹ *Discourse on Method*, 2.4.

The fact is, this initial choice is more a matter of skill than of mathematical proof. St. Thomas would have said that it flows from prudence, the art of governing one's life. Many factors, both objective and subjective, can influence such a choice. In the best-case scenario, a dim insight into the truth of a master's teaching can inspire adherence, but the seduction of his human personality or many other pre-doctrinal elements may have the same effect. For a Catholic, the Church's repeated recommendation of Aquinas's authority bears no little weight in this prudential decision. In any case, the master is credited with an aptitude, already proven or presumed, for leading another to a true intellectual understanding of reality, through his own understanding of the doctrinal inheritance.

The necessity of rooting oneself in a tradition obviously does not exclude healthy criticism; neither does it involve any paralyzing servitude. Aristotle is said to have declared that "Plato is my friend, but the truth is even more so." In fact, the human soul is characterized by a transcendental openness to being *qua* being, to the totality of being. It is permeated by a natural desire to delve down to the source of being and intelligibility, which is none other than God Himself in His essence. Thence arises the soul's congenital dissatisfaction with all partial truth, and its perpetual animation by a searching drive. It thus cannot cling exclusively to what it receives from a specific and necessarily partial tradition. The absolutization of a particular tradition is a temptation that conceals a dangerous negation of the transcendence of the human person:

Care will need to be taken lest, contrary to the very nature of the human spirit, the legitimate defense of the uniqueness and originality of [a form of] thought be confused with the idea that a particular cultural tradition should remain closed in its difference and affirm itself by opposing other traditions.¹⁰

Nevertheless, in critically confronting received teaching with one's personal intellectual experience of the real, and above all, with other traditions of thought, one should avoid the dialectical temptation, the perpetual temptation toward the easy way out. This is not a case of denying one's own tradition, but *primo*, of appropriating its rationality in the most personal way, and *secundo*, of enriching it with the truth of other traditions. This said, one cannot exclude tradition's being changed, not through pure and simple rejection, but through purification and completion, when a truth found in the original tradition is proved to be taken up and better grounded in another doctrinal tradition. The truest tradition is therefore

¹⁰ *Fides et Ratio*, §72.

the most universal, the one that can account for the portion of truth contained in other traditions and integrate it into its own principles.

The Three Types of Thomism

A master is defined not only by his person, his spirit, but also by a specific teaching. The different ways of approaching the connection between spirit and doctrine in the teaching of St. Thomas have given rise to fairly different “types of Thomism.” I will mention here the three archetypes.

Thomism-by-inspiration: The first is Thomism-by-inspiration. It should be noted that this kind is currently on the path to extinction, since it can really flourish only in a context where it is “obligatory” to refer to St. Thomas, so that it has to seek out ways of simulating the Master’s teaching and honoring him without necessarily adhering to his doctrine.

In fact, the more broadly this version of Thomism relativizes Thomas’s doctrine, the more attached it is to the supposed “spirit” of St. Thomas. Its main tenet is to repeat today what St. Thomas is said to have done in the thirteenth century, namely, expressing the Christian faith in contemporary cultural categories. Thomism today apparently needs to integrate Freud, Heidegger, and Derrida just as St. Thomas sought to integrate Aristotle! Strongly flavored with apologism, Thomism-by-inspiration is less interested in promoting a specific (and outdated) doctrinal content than in promoting a certain state of mind. It retains from St. Thomas’s enterprise a Christian confidence in the value of the intellect, a somewhat pacified notion of the relations between reason and faith, an open-mindedness to the real and to different systems of thought, and watchful attention to “the signs of the times . . .”

This is all well and good—but it remains insufficient. Thomism-by-inspiration is a minimal Thomism which has two faults. First, it misinterprets the nature and the very meaning of St. Thomas’s project (not to mention the entirety of the theological enterprise). Theology does not primarily and fundamentally seek to translate the faith into the language of an era, but it sets itself the task of disengaging the intelligible content from within the Word of God and expressing it in a scientific way, seeking as much as possible the organic and universal essence which allows a doctrinal system to transcend its own era. To this end, St. Thomas takes up philosophical elements from Aristotle, as well as from Neoplatonism (after subjecting them to strict critical interrogation in light of the Word of God), not primarily because they are “modern,” but because he perceives them to be true. “Modernity” is automatically bestowed on anyone who seeks truth above all else.

Second, Thomism-by-inspiration fails to examine the properly doctrinal foundation of the very possibility of its open-minded attitude to any truth

regardless of origin, an attitude which is so strikingly evident in St. Thomas. This attitude is founded not on eclecticism, nor on indifference to truth, but on the quest that seeks out the most universal and widely encompassing principles from every discipline. This is what makes it possible to integrate into the Thomistic synthesis truths conceived elsewhere, or later.

In fact, Thomism-by-inspiration recoils in horror at the incongruity implied in purely and simply tracing one's ancestry, today, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, back to a thirteenth-century doctrine. Are the seven centuries of thought separating us from St. Thomas really merely the history of a long and dramatic divergence? Fundamentalist Thomism, at least, has no such scruples.

Fundamentalist Thomism: At the opposite end of the spectrum from the previous position stands fundamentalist Thomism. This variety of Thomism is easily recognizable on account of its visceral reaction against the historical approach to the Thomistic corpus and is easily irritated by what it considers to be the excessive attention given today to the historical and cultural conditionings of the intellectual life. True, in its aversion to historicism it does have the benefit of defending the trans-historical value of concept and truth, but it does so by forgetting that the absolute of truth is given only in the contingency of history.

In fact, fundamentalist Thomism is little inclined to accept the inescapable elements of groping and incertitude implied in every human quest for truth; thus it is convinced not only that Christian revelation endows humanity with a collection of certain and stable supernatural truths (which is true), but also that, in one way or another, the supernatural certitude of revelation extends to human realities like philosophy, politics, or even theology (which, although founded on faith, is no less the work of human reason).

It is true that via a concrete union between the natural and supernatural orders, the Word of God also powerfully illuminates our human life in its very humanity. This is why we can have Christian philosophy, Christian morality, a social and political Church doctrine. Yet this life-giving and illuminating influx of grace cannot extend right down to each of the tiniest details, which is what fundamentalist Thomism longs for: a philosophy and theology so perfectly specified "from above" that they will always be safe from the vicissitudes of human history. This position holds up the work of St. Thomas as some sort of timeless Koran, guaranteed by magisterial sanction and containing the definitive expression of theology and philosophical wisdom, formulated once and for all as immutable theses.

Living Thomism: The third way of being a Thomist—which I consider to be the best way, as should be evident by now—strives for a living

fidelity to the teaching of St. Thomas. It accomplishes this goal in two stages, which correspond to the two general complementary types of work expected from an integral Thomistic school.

The first step is to take seriously the historical dimension, not of truth, but of the exercise of thought. This principle is one of modernity's major and legitimate achievements. Even if a doctrinal system is ultimately inspired by a quest for wisdom, it addresses specific problems situated within history and its contingencies, so that a precise knowledge of a doctrine's context can be very helpful for understanding the doctrine. Thanks to the historical-critical method, this is accomplished by examining the context of St. Thomas's teaching, as well as its strengths and significant developments, and reconstituting them in the most accurate way. In fact, in the Thomistic *corpus* as in any doctrinal *corpus*, it is necessary to distinguish between roots, trunk, branches, and leaves. In other words, St. Thomas's teachings are not all on the same level. Even if Thomism does not share the modern longing for a perfect hypothetico-deductive system, it is by no means eclectic. It is not an aggregate of doctrines, but a doctrinal organism. Some of St. Thomas's doctrines are more fundamental, more connected to principles, and thus more explanatory, while others are more circumstantial, more closely linked to historical conditionings. The task of exposing the structure of this doctrinal organism belongs to internal criticism and historical study. This hermeneutical work makes it possible to distinguish essentials from accessories, fundamental principles from certain contingent conclusions, the enduring from the outdated. In other words, here we find no trace of the historical relativism that haunted certain twentieth-century Thomists in their nightmares. In fact, according to an ex-Thomist like Umberto Eco, historical perspectivization—initially intended to promote a better understanding of St. Thomas's Thomism by disengaging it from its later deformations—inevitably led to historicizing and relativizing St. Thomas's work, and consequently rendering any new appropriation of St. Thomas's work unthinkable. According to Eco, the historical turn was the Trojan horse within the Thomistic citadel, since he deems it impossible to “recuperate integrally a system of thought which in reality only appears worthwhile and coherent if it is evaluated according to the problems of its own time.”¹¹ Since in the Marxist view a doctrine is only the expression of a specific age, Eco insists that those Thomists who

¹¹ “. . . récupération intégrale d'une pensée qui, en réalité, n'apparaît valable et cohérente que si elle est estimée à l'aune des problèmes qui furent ceux de son époque.” *Le problème esthétique chez saint Thomas*, “Conclusion (1970)” (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1993), 216.

welcomed the historical dimension signed on the dotted line without realizing that they were signing an inescapable death-warrant. In this respect, Eco is simply taking a circuitous route to agreeing with the most conservative neo-Thomists, who are determined to cast history out of the walled garden that belongs to the immutable Thomistic truth. It is indeed necessary to maintain that the truth of a doctrine cannot be reduced to the felicitous expression of a historical moment, and that it transcends its empirical genealogy, i.e., the conditions of its development. Doctrine seeks conformity to reality—a reality which is not completely submerged in the transience of historical change, even if it is presented within the context of this transience rather than in a static historical state.

In conjunction with the never-ending hermeneutics of St. Thomas's historical work, it thus becomes possible to take the second step by validating the integrative power of Thomism's constitutive principles, whether by applying them to contemporary questions that never crossed St. Thomas's mind (as the masters of the Thomistic school and their imitators constantly strive to do, with varying degrees of success), or by developing the hidden potentials in St. Thomas's Thomism in response to the needs of the broad cultural movement, or, finally, by integrating into the principles of Thomism certain captive truths, i.e., good ideas that were discovered and originally developed (poorly) in defective or even largely erroneous traditions. In the words of M.-M. Labourdette, we must "grasp by means of St. Thomas's own principles an aspect of the real which was only historically manifested as a result of different principles and in conjunction with different categories. This constitutes neither concordism nor eclectism, but an integration which presupposes critical vigilance and constructive effort."¹²

This work of actualizing Thomism is a risky business. In fact, two intellectual temperaments are here in opposition. On the one hand, those who are more daring and more concerned with immediate apologetics do not hesitate to attempt rapid syntheses between certain elements of modernity and the Thomistic tradition. They thereby risk creating hybrids that are hardly viable. Even worse, one can be tempted to actualize Thomism by re-thinking it in terms of categories that are foreign to its very "essence." As a result, one ends up taking apart St. Thomas's teaching, retaining nothing except what seems to have some pertinence in light of principles that are *foreign* to Thomism. Not only does this often involve exegetical contortions over Aquinas's work which the historical method hardly justifies, but above all it involves dismantling the coher-

¹² Labourdette, "La théologie et ses sources: fermes propos," *Revue thomiste* 47 (1947): 12–13.

ence of a system of thought. Living Thomism, however, progresses only by integrating *homogenizable* external elements, that is, those in harmony with an organism already constituted by essential principles that are revealed through rigorous historical exegesis. “From a Kantian chrysalis, no Thomist butterfly will ever emerge,” as Maritain used to joke about the utopia of Transcendental Thomism.

On the other hand, those of more spontaneously conservative temperament are always somewhat hesitant to disburden the original form of Thomism from certain apparently more archaic features. For instance, behind Aristotle’s definitely outdated physics, they see a philosophy of nature that retains its relevance. Moreover, their lively awareness of the hierarchy of knowledge convinces them that the great principles of metaphysics or theology should not be subjected to the seasonal variations of secular scientific paradigms. *Volvitur scientia, stat metaphysica*.

In this work of bringing Thomism alive, today’s Thomists must justify their existence, not only to a secular culture that sees Thomism as little more than a sentimental archaism, but also to an inexhaustible Christian anti-Thomism that has shadowed the developments of Thomism since the end of the thirteenth century. In the mid-twentieth century, this internal anti-Thomism denounced Thomism as a dusty old Scholasticism, cut off from history and the cultural challenges of modernity, playing the lusterless role of an instrument of ideological normalization. Today, anti-Thomism gladly takes up the charges the *nouvelle théologie* had previously hurled against Thomism, especially that of not being sufficiently Christian, of having thoroughly contaminated the faith with Greek metaphysics, of having instilled in Christian thought the seeds of a destructive rationalism whose potentials have unfolded in contemporary atheism. Against the Scholastic parenthesis, they uphold a radical return to the Fathers, to that which is “specifically Christian.” It is amusing to note that these charges are exactly analogous to those of John Peckham, Peter John Olivi, or Henry of Ghent—all the “Augustinians” from the end of the thirteenth century who viewed St. Thomas as having secretly joined the camp of pagan “naturalism.”

To all these charges we can reply, *primo*, that St. Thomas is more deeply rooted in Tradition than many realize today, in an age which stubbornly places the Patristic era in opposition to the Scholastic era, and *secundo*, that St. Thomas’s specific genius (and even, I believe, his ecclesial mission) was precisely to gather up into Christian wisdom a philosophy that grants access to the reality of nature. For St. Thomas, Christianity is called to integrate and purify authentic human wisdom. N.V