

Inside Baseball, the Future of Thomism, and the Mean Streets of Contemporary Academia*

MICHAEL S. SHERWIN, O.P.
Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas
Rome, Italy

Several months before I received this invitation to share my thoughts on the future of Thomism, I heard a lecture that made two astounding claims. First, the lecturer affirmed that Fr. Servais-Theodore Pinckaers, O.P., my mentor, was part of the Thomistic commentary tradition. In other words, that Fr. Pinckaers read Thomas Aquinas from the perspective of the interpretations of Aquinas's work advanced by the Renaissance and Baroque Scholastic commentators, such as Thomas de Vio (Cajetan) or John (of St. Thomas) Poinset. Secondly, the lecturer also affirmed that to be a true Thomist today, one must also read Aquinas from within this Second Scholastic tradition, engaging the questions they posed and drawing on their conclusions. I deeply disagree with both of these affirmations.

First, let us consider Servais Pinckaers's relationship to the commentary tradition. Fr. Pinckaers used to say that, when you read a Second Scholastic commentator such as Cajetan, what you are reading is fifty percent Aquinas and fifty percent Cajetan. Pinckaers would explain that, when Cajetan comments on a Thomistic text, he is guided by questions arising from within his own day and employing Latin terms that had often shifted in their meaning from the meanings they held in the time of St. Thomas. Fr. Pinckaers asserted that these percentages also hold when any of us first

* This text is based on reflections delivered at the University of Notre Dame during a celebration of Prof. John O'Callaghan for his years of service as director of the Maritain Center, during which each participant was invited to offer his thoughts on the future of Thomism.

approach a medieval or classical text. When we first read Aquinas, it is often fifty percent Aquinas and fifty percent us. We can, however, change these initial percentages by becoming students of history—something that was not available to Cajetan. When we understand fra Tommaso d'Aquino in his own historical context, his profile becomes sharper and his voice clearer, as he speaks to us across the centuries. In other words, we change the percentages. As students of history, when we read him, it is more of him and less of us that we read. As Fr. James Weisheipl, O.P. said so beautifully in his groundbreaking study of St. Thomas:

Strange as this may seem, unless the teaching of Aquinas is seen in its true historical perspective, there is not only the danger of misunderstanding his teaching, but also the danger of rendering Thomas irrelevant to our age. Therefore some attempt must be made to understand the historical perspective in which Thomas thought and wrote in order to appreciate the transcendental insights he contributed to man in every age.¹

For this reason, Servais Pinckaers read Aquinas not in light of the commentary tradition, but in light of Aquinas's biblical, patristic and classical philosophical sources, and in the context of the controversies and concerns of St. Thomas's own day. Fr. Pinckaers felt that it was by becoming conversant with this historical Aquinas that Aquinas could still speak meaningfully to us today.²

Second, as to the future of Thomism, I do not have a crystal ball that would let me see the course that Thomism will take. I believe, however, that if students of Aquinas primarily follow the path of reading Aquinas in light of the commentary tradition, then Thomism will risk, as Fr. Weisheipl warned, "rendering Thomas irrelevant to our age." By following this course, Thomistic studies will increasingly become the domain of an ever-smaller group of specialists. The work of such specialists will be of interest the way "inside baseball" is of interest to a select group of statistic hungry aficionados. Just as "inside baseball" is of little interest to the vast majority of

¹ James Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas d'Aquino: His Life, Thought and Works* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1974), 1–2.

² See Servais Pinckaers, "Dominican Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century," in *The Pinckaers Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Craig Stephen Titus (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 73–89.

baseball fans, so too Thomism will be of little interest to the vast majority of general readers of theology.³

But if this is so, what should the future of Thomism be? An initial answer to this question already suggests itself: if Thomistic studies is to have a future, it must make every effort to understand Thomas Aquinas from within his historical context and in light of his biblical, patristic, and philosophical sources. This, however, is only one aspect of a healthy future Thomism. Philosophy and theology are never reducible merely to the history of ideas. Philosophy is the ordered love of wisdom, while theology is the study of the God of love who reveals himself to us through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ—and this God and his wisdom are ever ancient and ever new. To have a future, Thomism must also live in this newness. Specifically, as working philosophers and theologians, students of Aquinas would do well to develop the habit of asking what Aquinas would do if he were with us today: what questions would he address and what tools of analysis would he develop? An adequate answer to this twin question would require a lifetime to answer, or at least be of greater length than these brief paragraphs permit. I will thus just note two features.

First, I believe Aquinas would take advantage of our deeper and more readily available access to Biblical Hebrew and to both Attic and Koine Greek. Likewise, he would immerse himself in the historical and cultural studies of both the Septuagint Greek Bible and the Greek New Testament, concerning the history of their gradual composition and their conceptual engagement with pagan Greek culture, especially pagan moral philosophy.⁴

³ On the origin and meaning of the term “inside baseball,” see William Safire, “On Language; Inside Baseball,” *New York Times*, June 19, 1988, 10 (section 6), [nytimes.com/1988/06/19/magazine/on-language-inside-baseball.html](https://www.nytimes.com/1988/06/19/magazine/on-language-inside-baseball.html). For the view that “inside baseball” style of play is ruining baseball for most fans, see Ken Reed, “Analytics Destroying Baseball’s Entertainment Value,” *League of Fans*, April 21, 2022, leagueoffans.org/2022/04/21/analytics-destroying-baseballs-entertainment-value. See also, Edwin Amenta, “Statistics Ruined Baseball by Perfecting It,” *The Conversation*, March 27, 2019, theconversation.com/statistics-ruined-baseball-by-perfecting-it-113896.

⁴ For an overview of the work that has been done on the context and importance of the Septuagint Greek Old Testament, see James K. Aitken, ed., *The T&T Clark Companion to the Septuagint* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); Natalio Fernández Marcos, *The Septuagint in Context: Introduction to the Greek Version of the Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 2000); and Timothy Michael Law, *When God Spoke Greek: The Septuagint and the Making of the Christian Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). For a taste of the work that has been done on virtue language in the New Testament, see J. Daryl Charles, *Virtue amidst Vice: The Catalog of Virtues in 2 Peter* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

(Alas, these are areas of scholarship that far too few students of Aquinas hazard to enter or even to discern from a far.)

Second, I think Aquinas would be bemused by how rationalistic Thomism had become. Moreover, I believe that he would quickly recognize how inadequate Scholastic rationalism is for addressing the challenges that confront us today. He too would return to the rough ground of human experience.⁵ He too would see how renewed attention to humble human experience could help us offer a renewed account of the philosophy of nature and of the humble moral principles that reflection on human action can still provide us, when this analysis takes seriously the context of moral learning. In other words, Aquinas would study the insights of Alasdair MacIntyre.⁶ These, however, are just two directions I believe St. Thomas would pursue if he were alive today. Others, no doubt, from their own experience and reading, would propose other features. The important point is that, if Thomism is to have a healthy future, we should acquire the habit of asking ourselves what Thomas Aquinas would do in our contemporary context. Indeed, as a reminder, we might even begin to wear wristbands with the initials “WWTAD” (“What Would Thomas Aquinas Do?”), for this is the question that as students of Aquinas we should keep close to our hearts.

Someone who embodies this practice of studying Thomas Aquinas in the context of contemporary questions is Professor John O’Callaghan, the celebration of whom has inspired these reflections. Ralph McInerny long ago drew our attention to the affinities between the moral philosopher and the writer of fiction, especially detective fiction. I wish to go further and suggest that Raymond Chandler’s description of the ideal detective well describes the ideal Thomist philosopher, especially in the context of the mean streets of the secular (or secularizing) institutions along which

⁵ See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), 46e (pt. 1, sec. 107): “We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need friction. Back to the rough ground!”

⁶ See especially these works by Alasdair MacIntyre: *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990); *Dependent Rational Animals, Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999); *First Principles, Final Ends, and Contemporary Philosophical Issues* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1990). See also David Solomon’s analysis of the importance of the work of Elizabeth Anscombe: “Elizabeth Anscombe’s ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’: Fifty Years Later,” *Christian Bioethics* 14 (2008): 109–22.

many students of Aquinas are forced to walk. Both the philosopher and the detective seek the truth, and their search can be a dangerous one. What Chandler said of the detective, therefore, is well applicable (with slight modification) to both Prof. O'Callaghan and to the ideal Thomist I hope will always walk among us.

Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. . . . He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor—by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. . . . He is a relatively poor man, or he would not be a [philosopher] at all. He is a common man or he could not go among common people. He has a sense of character, or he would not know his job. . . . He talks as the man of his age talks—that is, with rude wit, a lively sense of the grotesque, a disgust for sham, and a contempt for pettiness. . . . [Philosophy] is this man's adventure in search of a hidden truth, and it would be no adventure if it did not happen to a man fit for adventure. He has a range of awareness that startles you, but it belongs to him by right, because it belongs to the world he lives in. If there were enough like him, the world would be a very safe place to live in, without becoming too dull to be worth living in.⁷

This is the John O'Callaghan I know, and this is the Thomism he has promoted, a Thomism that is worth having a future: one that makes philosophy a safe place to live in, but also a place that is never dull. NEV

⁷ Raymond Chandler, *The Simple Art of Murder* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1950), 7–8. The texts in brackets added by the author.