

Engaging MacIntyre's *God, Philosophy, Universities*

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THIS BOOK states in the introduction that it derives from “three convictions.” The first is that Catholic lay people need a better philosophical formation than they currently possess. The second is that the best way into Catholic philosophy is through its history, “as a continuing conversation” between contemporary enquirers and its greatest wise-crackers of the past (“good craic!” as an Irish priest once described his talks with Herbert McCabe, O.P., at Notre Dame). Thirdly, philosophy is not only a matter of abstract argument, but is a social phenomenon, with its own institutional ecology, especially that of universities. In so far as these convictions are the criteria by which the book is to be judged, it achieves its aim. It is accessible to people without advanced knowledge of philosophy, it presents a clear and thorough survey of Catholic philosophy through its history, and it explains how the university context has affected this philosophy, sometimes for the better, and sometimes for the worse. The book is evidently the work of a master, so all I hope to contribute to the conversation it engenders is to throw in some Gilsonian and theological crackers.

MacIntyre's book is reminiscent of Gilson's *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*. For Gilson, what really holds philosophical experience together is metaphysics, and in particular the metaphysical reality of being. The thesis of *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* is that one can't alter one aspect of the “philosophical experience” without that affecting things all the way down the line. In particular, if one seeks to reduce or remove metaphysical explanation from one's interpretation of reality, something else, which was not born for the role, like the divine will, with al-Ashari or Malebranche, moral law for Kant, or society with Comte,

will have the weight of metaphysics thrust upon it. In the end, Gilson argued, “metaphysics always buries its undertakers,” because human beings are bound to seek a first cause and principle of unity for their experience. MacIntyre’s book is similar, though its focus is somewhat more the unity of the disciplines studied in Universities than the unity of philosophy. It is a sort of *The Unity of University Experience*. A guiding theme of its history of Catholic philosophy is how the university disciplines should hang together, but often don’t, in modern research universities. So for instance, the “Averroistic” idea of the “two truths” independently and disparately earned by philosophy and theology, and its rejection and refutation by St. Thomas Aquinas, which was always stressed in mid-twentieth century Catholic histories of medieval philosophy, because it stood for the coherent relation of faith and reason, is significant in MacIntyre’s book as representing the fragmentation or unity of all the disciplines, not just philosophy and theology. In MacIntyre’s presentation, the significance of Aquinas’s refutation of the notion of philosophy and theology representing two disparate truths is that the different intellectual “domains are not self-enclosed, so that the truths in any one domain have no implication for what is true or false in any of the others. Some truths in physics exclude certain historical possibilities. Some truths in mathematics exclude certain physical possibilities. Some truths in theology exclude certain physical and certain philosophical possibilities” (68). The different domains, MacIntyre tells us, ought to “share a single concept of truth,” which gives meaning to the specific standards by which truth is discerned in the individual academic disciplines (69).

If rather than talking about the unity of metaphysics, and the unity of the human metaphysical impulse, one is guided by the notion of the (ideal) unity of the university curriculum, or the ideal university society, as a cooperative ecology of disciplines and their teachers, the ultimate picture is a bit less clear than it is on the “metaphysical” model. On the one hand, the book argues that modern universities pursue an unconnected set of disciplines, because once we “[s]ubtract the knowledge of God from our knowledge . . . what you have is an assortment of different kinds of knowledge, but no way of relating them to each other” (147). The point there is that, since the emergence of the modern research university in the eighteenth century, with its “marginal[ization]” and “abandon[ment]” of theology (136), “universities have become . . . fragmented and partitioned institutions” (174). Someone looking for a more “metaphysical” picture of things might feel that MacIntyre is wanting the “university society” as such to carry the weight of metaphysics. If it is supposed to do that job, and if, as MacIntyre argues, it is currently

failing, then the outcome should be simply a wholly fragmented and disjointed curriculum, in which interdisciplinarity or the foundation of other disciplines upon a single key discipline or set of insights is impossible. As MacIntyre puts it, the result should be that "the conception of the university presupposed by and embodied in the institutional forms of contemporary research universities is . . . one that suggests . . . that there is no such thing as the universe, no whole of which the subject matters studied by the various disciplines are all parts or aspects, but instead just a multifarious set of assorted subject matters" (174).

But on the other hand, MacIntyre seems to share Newman's (and Gilson's) opinion that such intellectual fragmentation cannot last long, since

if we subtract any one of the sciences from the curriculum, there is an inevitable tendency for other sciences to trespass on the intellectual territory thus left vacant, to make claims that are not in fact . . . justifiable by the findings of their own discipline. So economists may pretend to a competence on questions of ethics—one of Newman's . . . examples—or natural scientists to a competence on questions of metaphysics or theology, something that was not uncommon during the twentieth century. (146)

And the disciplines don't just, on this view, encroach on one another's territory, competing rather than cooperating for space, but rather one single discipline tends to take over from an exiled philosophy or theology (the queen of the sciences). In one of the most illuminating suggestions of the book, MacIntyre proposes that the popularity of naturalism in the past half century is due to a felt need to resolve the disintegration of the diverse sciences, by founding all of them on physics (147), a maneuver he says does not work.

Perhaps I was looking for more unity in the book than it intended to offer. But it seemed to me somewhat confusing to complain on the one hand that modern research universities offer the students a diversity of unrelated disciplines, but on the other to claim that these universities are not so intellectually fragmented after all, since the disciplines reorganize themselves around new, though unworkable, centers. One could say that it was as if, in this book, the 'old Thomist' anti-liberal MacIntyre is at odds with the MacIntyre who also takes on board the 'phenomenological' approach of Newman. Thomism and phenomenology are not inherently opposed; at least Gilson, in his introduction to Newman's *Grammar of Assent*, did not take issue with what he calls the author's "phenomenology of religious belief." What is difficult to combine is a Thomistic or phenomenological concept of the human mind as naturally following

certain laws (such as the need for some guiding centre for one's intellectual activity) and a neo-Thomistic or neo-Aristotelian ideal of society as a kind of intrinsic standard or absolute. For the first, what is of the essence is the human mind itself and its objects, and these are innately interdisciplinary and co-ordinated. Some kind of coordination of efforts is bound to happen, even if it is one based on false or limited premises. For the second, it is the historical society which is of the essence, dictating the outcomes, and unless one starts from a rightly ordered society, one will not be able to achieve the interdisciplinarity or the coordination: unless one starts from the good society, one can't regain it, even in wrong or partially false ways.

But at the same time, perhaps that bit of unclarity is simply the fact of the matter: on the one hand, teachers and students in modern research universities experience a setting in which the proponents of diverse, highly specialized disciplines have little to say to one another, but, on the other, there are deep intellectual undercurrents in these universities which either unite the disciplines around centers ill-suited to perform the task (like physics or biology) or promote an "interdisciplinarity" that effectively destroys the notion of disciplines as independent domains of enquiry. My father, who had attended English schools, which taught history and geography as separate subjects, didn't like the "Social Studies" textbook my brother had in the sixth grade, in America, in the late 1960s. He was always finding minor faults of geography or history in it, and laughed at its pictures of ancient Greek boys doing gymnastics in little wrap-around skirts. The textbook juxtaposed pictures of American families tucking into steaks with drawings of Russian families staring at empty plates. He dubbed it "the Propaganda Book," and when my brother had to do his 'Social Studies' homework, Father would declare, "bring the Propaganda Book." Not being either geography or history, but a muddled merger of the two, "Social Studies" is not a real subject. And where there is no real domain of intellectual enquiry, propaganda, of the left or right, is substituted for knowledge. The kind of interdisciplinarity exemplified by "Social Studies" is a real pedagogical danger in contemporary universities, where the curriculum is revised to compel it willy-nilly to produce integrated "sets of skills." So, of course is the internal disintegration of the disciplines at the higher, "research" level, or what MacIntyre describes as the fragmentation of philosophy into a series of unrelated subdisciplines (17–18). When, eventually, some "higher research level" synthesis is made of these unconnected parts, it will doubtless consist in Higher Propaganda. Perhaps, following MacIntyre's suggestion about naturalism, one could say this has already happened, at a vulgar

level, with sociobiology and the "New Atheism." Perhaps the immense popularity of these trends amongst plain persons is a result of their making the grand, synthetic claims that students go to philosophy wanting to hear. Moreover, as MacIntyre says, few of the prestigious Catholic research universities are doing much to contest such developments: "The most prestigious Catholic universities often mimic the structures and goals of the most prestigious secular universities and do so with little sense of something having gone seriously amiss" (179). Though I admire MacIntyre's effort to put the "social context" of the university at the center of the discussion, and though it makes this book and its history very interesting, I don't see how the problem can be resolved without recourse to substances, whether one treats them in a metaphysical or a phenomenological way. If one wants to distinguish between real and false academic *subjects*, and to be able to say, "This is a real subject," correlating to a real domain of enquiry, one had better draw on a notion of substances to which that subject corresponds.

And likewise, one will have to perform the delicate exercise of indicating that some "disciplines" are inherently propagandistic, by showing that their "domains" and the laws they ascribe to them do not actually exist. If, for instance, history is not governed by the dialectical materialist laws which Karl Marx purported to have discovered therein, and the "domains" invented to show forth and exhibit these laws do not exist, in the sense of corresponding to actual, substantial realities, then the university subjects thereby generated are inherently propagandistic. The only way one will learn anything true in such disciplines is by accident, as when a Lithuanian friend picked up quite a bit of theology and medieval Catholic philosophy by studying "Atheism" at the University of Moscow in the mid 1980s: he said that in order to show the falsity of the religious claims, the Marxist professors sometimes had to describe them. So it is somewhat unfortunate, not to say dispiriting, to find that MacIntyre, speaking in his "anti-liberal" voice, takes the "unified curriculum" of the Marxist universities of the former Soviet Union and its unwilling satellites as a model, claiming that its unification around the Marxist truth claims gives it a greater affinity with what Christians should look for in a university than most of what they will find in the "contemporary American university." Complaining that "the very notion of . . . a single universe, different aspects of which are objects of enquiry for the various disciplines, but in such a way that each aspect needs to be related to every other" is lacking in anglophone universities, whether "professedly secular or professedly Catholic," MacIntyre asks us to

[c]onsider by contrast the Marxist universities of the Soviet Union or Communist Eastern Europe between 1917 and 1991 and put aside . . . the issues raised by their corruption by the pseudo-Marxism of Stalinist and post-Stalinist state power. . . . [T]heir atheism was not something merely negative, a denial of God's existence. It was a consequence of the dialectical and historical materialist understanding of the nature of things that provided them with a framework within which each of the academic disciplines could find its due place. So physics, history, and economics were all taught in a way that made their mutual relevance clear, and Marxist philosophy was assigned the tasks both of spelling out this relevance in contemporary terms and of explaining how the philosophies of the past had failed, just because they were the ideologically distorted expressions of class societies.

Although, as MacIntyre says, Catholics will not accept Marxist atheism, "they have had to recognize that Marxism is a theory or a set of theories with the same scope as their own and that in responding to it they are responding to a theoretical atheism that is in some ways more intellectually congenial than the practical atheism of contemporary American universities" (16–17). Here, it seems to me, we hear the "social" MacIntyre speaking, and admiring the Marxist universities not for their truth claims, but simply for being societies in which the different orders were thoroughly, if forcibly and unwillingly, integrated. I can't see much point in the disciplines being coordinated unless they are integrated around shared truths. What does it matter if the domains were neatly interrelated in Marxist universities, all being suffused with the principles of dialectical materialism, if those principles are not true, and the texts the professors produced and the students had to memorize were just "Propaganda books"? If the human mind is, as Gilson claimed, inherently metaphysical and bent on finding unity, then the great thing is to encourage it in its free discovery of real unities, real connections between the disciplines. Aside from the exertions of John Paul II, it was the incipient emergence of the internet that helped to dissolve Communist orthodoxy in the former U.S.S.R. and bring down the walls dividing the Soviet East from the West; likewise, today it looks as if free, integrative "craic" will re-emerge outside the walls of the universities, on the Web. To paraphrase Dostoevsky, such conversation will redeem the universities.

The theological side of these comments begins with a confession. This book infiltrated my unconscious so profoundly and yet so furtively that I plagiarized the title without any conscious intention to do so. In the course of editing a book of conference papers we planned to subtitle *Initium Sapientiae Timor Domini*, I proposed changing the title from "Theology, the

Universities and the Humanities" to "Theology, University, Humanities." It was only when chatting with David Braine on the phone ("What are you doing?" "Reviewing a book by Alasdair MacIntyre." "What's it called?"), that I closed *God, Philosophy, Universities*, looked at the cover, and realized whence my inspiration for dropping the definite articles flowed. As a theologian, I am interested in analogous questions to MacIntyre's but I read his book from the angle of theology and the universities. For instance, if one is accustomed to speaking the languages of contemporary academic theology, one experiences a certain frisson when one hears the belief of Christians, together with that of Judaism and that of Islam, described as "theism." It is practically taboo today, and certainly profoundly "theologically incorrect" to describe the religion of Trinitarian believers as "theism" along with equating it with the theism of Judaism and Islam. About the only time theologians use the word "theism" is when they are disavowing any affinity between their Christian beliefs about God and those of "classical theism." Evidently the philosophers have different speech codes as well as different emphases and interests.

Another example of the inadvertent cognitive dissonance produced in a theologian by a philosopher's book comes in the sentence that defines the Catholic philosophical tradition as one "within which a Catholic allegiance is inseparable from a recognition of philosophical enquiry as a secular and autonomous activity" (41). Though they are not perhaps as consistent about this as in their rejection of the term "theism," many theologians think of philosophy as a discipline that is not wholly and entirely secular. Instead, they think of Plato's myths and his arguments, or Aristotle's wonder and his analyses, or Hegel's implicit and explicit mythologies and his rationalizations, as inseparably intertwined, and thus they conceive of philosophy as often containing an unsecular, religious thread, one it never quite leaves behind when argument takes the upper hand over belief. They think of the religious imagination within philosophy as the element that makes it possible for theology to do business with philosophy.

A philosopher evidently doesn't want the theologians needling in on his territory, and for some good reasons. MacIntyre gives an historical explanation of his belief in the importance of the autonomy of philosophy when he makes a familiar contrast of Byzantine, Islamic, and Western Catholic education in the Middle Ages. For all three, as "medieval theistic civilizations," "belief in God" was "a presupposition of all secular enquiry and activity." But, for the Byzantines, the imperial government and the church were sufficiently indistinguishable, and education necessarily subordinated to their merged practical purposes, as to make it a practical impossibility for secular knowledge to be pursued and taught

“for its own sake.” The Muslims did create a great philosophical tradition, but, again, its flourishing was thwarted, MacIntyre says, by the excessive “integration” of the political and religious institutions. Only in the “Latin West,” he says, did there arise “a conception of a need for and the legitimacy of secular institutions through which God is to be served, of the existence of areas of human activity and enquiry in which the authoritative standards are independent either of the church or of secular rulers, and this in a way that is in accordance with God’s will.” The result was that “rival” “authorities” and traditions were possible: “[A]lternative and rival answers to questions about the relationship of secular to ecclesiastical authority were posed in political terms that paralleled the competing rival answers to questions debated in the schools about the relationship of secular enquiries to those authoritative teachings to which theologians appealed” (61–62). All true, all quite familiar, and it is all too clear that the Marxist universities of the U.S.S.R. were modelled more on the Byzantine and Islamic paradigms than on the Latin West.

How far does the paradigm of separate political powers take us in understanding the relation of philosophy and theology in the mind of Thomas or of Thomists? If we use it, we may think of Thomas talking to Aristotle as one talking to a separate, autonomous dialogue partner. Even that analogy doesn’t really work, because someone who enters a conversation is changed by it, and says things he or she would not have done if they hadn’t been speaking with these and such people. That is part of what it means to think of people as historical, and of philosophy as a long-term, tradition-based, historical conversation. So far as Aristotle is alive today, and in conversation with us, and was likewise alive for the medievals, it could be problematic to describe Gilson as “present[ing] a curiously un-Aristotelian Aquinas,” as MacIntyre does (157). Gilson once remarked that, when Thomas baptized Aristotle, he made him a new man. For those Thomists who take note of this newness in the Aristotle on which they draw, what Aristotle “said” in his original, historical persona can be modified by a sense of what he is saying today. An example of this, to me, is the different uses made of Aristotle by Francisco de Vitoria and Las Casas, on the one hand, and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda on the other. As described by MacIntyre, the 1550–51 debates between the “paleo”-Aristotelian Sepúlveda and Las Casas about the Spanish treatment of the American Indians was about how Aristotle speaks in the sixteenth century: “Sepúlveda followed Aristotle in arguing that there is a class of human beings who are ‘natural slaves.’ Their lack of natural capacities is such that they can only be directed towards good ends by rational agents who impose their authority upon them. Sepúlveda identified the American Indians as just such natural slaves and

the Spaniards . . . as . . . rational agents. Las Casas did not deny outright that there might be such natural slaves. But his firsthand experience of Indian life gave him the strongest grounds for rejecting the claim that the Indians fell into this category" (108). It could be that more than "firsthand experience of Indian life" entered the equation for Vitoria and Las Casas. Theirs was not an "un-Aristotelian" Thomism, but a Thomism within which, like the American Indians, Aristotle could be "baptized" and the anthropological and political implications of baptism taken seriously. For Las Casas and Vitoria, Aristotelianism was not an unqualified absolute, but was read through the modifying lens of Christianity.

MacIntyre says at the outset that he has for six years been teaching a course with the same title as this book. One can only conclude by saying how lucky his students have been. Several of the theologians who have contributed to my lesser volume draw on it. The irony of my Gilsonian and theological quibbles with *God, Philosophy, Universities* is perhaps that it may ultimately be more quoted by theologians, in their defense of their presence within the universities, than by philosophers, with their determination to retain their trade-union rights within the guild of secular philosophers. It is a book that theologians, amongst other plain persons, need to read.

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