

Fides et Ratio, Analytic Philosophy, and Metaphysics of Goodness

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OBVIOUSLY the encyclical *Fides et Ratio* is one of the many great documents of this pontificate which will be cited for decades to come. That needs no demonstration. It seems, however, to pay little if any attention to the ways in which philosophy has been practised in the mainstream Anglo-American tradition for the past half century.

Addressing primarily his fellow bishops (§6, 50), Pope John Paul II surveys the state of modern philosophy (§46–48, 88–90); notes the neglect of philosophy by some (many?) Catholic theologians and in some (many?) Catholic institutions (§61–62); insists on the indispensability of philosophy for the understanding and expounding of Catholic Christian doctrine (e.g., §5, 65, 77); and invites philosophers to respond to the vocation of true philosophy (§106) as a search for wisdom—indeed, with respect to philosophers who are themselves Catholic, inviting them to see the Blessed Virgin Mary as “the table at which faith sits in thought.” and thus to cultivate the practice of *philosophari in Maria* (§108). More specifically, he recommends a return to metaphysics as the “philosophy of being” (§76, 97–98). Above all, he hopes that philosophers would show less reluctance to confront the Big Questions: “the problem of evil and suffering, the personal nature of God and the question of the meaning of life or, more directly, the radical metaphysical question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” (§76). Throughout the encyclical the pope highlights “the deep-seated distrust of reason” (§55), which he sees as characteristic of modern thought in general: the central issue for his pastoral concern since it has effects, evidently, in Catholic institutions.

Those who study St. Thomas Aquinas in the environment of Anglo-American analytical philosophy, rather than in that of “postmodern” phenomenological and hermeneutic philosophies, have, of course, much to learn from the encyclical; yet it is not very evident that the author and his advisers have paid enough informed attention to our tradition to engage with it seriously. While “a certain positivist cast of mind” frames much English-speaking philosophy—that is undeniable—few if any mainstream analytic philosophers would regard their work as “postmodern” or subscribe to the doctrines of post-Nietzschean nihilism (§91). Anglo-American philosophy may be lumped under scientism (§88) and pragmatism (§89)—a ticketing which would not be incorrect or bizarre; yet, if so, that is to ignore the struggles *against* varieties of these positions which have preoccupied philosophers in the analytic tradition for many years. If we were to regard great philosophers like Bertrand Russell and William James as progenitors of scientism and pragmatism respectively, caricaturing a bit, we should also want to say that the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein (properly understood!) engages with both but leaves nothing standing of either scientism or pragmatism. For those of us who work in universities in which analytic philosophy dominates, the modern philosophy with which *Fides et Ratio* deals seems “Continental,” post-Nietzschean and post-Heideggerian—a way of philosophizing barely acknowledged as philosophy at all in many Anglo-American philosophy departments! Rightly or wrongly—perhaps to some extent wrongly but perhaps to a greater extent rightly—philosophers trained in the analytic tradition are always startled at the seriousness with which the work of Heidegger, for example, is taken by many Catholic theologians. It is not difficult to find analytic philosophers, themselves devout Catholics, who despair of making much headway in some of Pope John Paul II’s earlier writings because of what seems to them the impenetrable jargon of the phenomenological tradition.

The pope expresses gratitude to modern philosophers for many insights such as “penetrating analyses of perception and experience, of the imaginary and the unconscious, of personhood and intersubjectivity, of freedom and values, of time and history” (§48)—a predominantly if not entirely phenomenological agenda, alluding to Husserl, Scheler, Merleau-Ponty, Lacan for *l’imaginaire*, Ricoeur, Heidegger, and so on.

A handful of philosophers in the analytic tradition, welcoming the message of the encyclical, have endorsed the pope’s regret that philosophers refrain from tackling the “big questions” (e.g., David Braine, John Haldane, Janet Martin Soskice, Anthony Kenny). Few non-Catholic colleagues would suppose that the encyclical was addressed also to them

but, in the unlikely event that they saw a copy, many would agree that philosophers should be much less reluctant to consider the Big Questions.

The heirs of Nietzsche and Heidegger seem to the analytical eye, on the other hand, to indulge only too uncritically in grand metanarratives as well as to encroach on matters most anglophone philosophers prefer to leave to theologians.

Stephen Mulhall, however, in one of several fine recent books by Oxford-trained philosophers, includes the last paragraph of the encyclical among the three quotations with which he prefaces his argument, contending in the course of his argument that the concerns of Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Kierkegaard—indeed the concerns of philosophy altogether—are unintelligible ultimately without reference to *theological* concerns.¹

This is, admittedly, a daringly ambitious book by Oxford standards. On the whole, philosophers in the analytic tradition prefer not to engage in questions that they regard as primarily religious.

One reason for this, obviously, is that the philosophy of religion, originally as a response to the challenges of skepticism, scientism, and logical-positivist verificationism, has developed into a specialist subject-area with its own journals and ever-expanding literature, such that most philosophers engaged in other fields of interest, even including ethics and metaphysics, are reluctant to intervene (and even if they personally are Christians). There is so much intellectually demanding discussion, in philosophical theology of a generally analytical bent, that, paradoxically, it has become largely inaccessible to other analytic philosophers, let alone to philosophers of other schools.²

Moreover, as the encyclical notes (§30), philosophy has been professionalized. From being contemplation of truth and a search for the ultimate goal and meaning of life, philosophy has often settled for much less—“some philosophers have abandoned the search for truth in itself and made their sole aim the attainment of objective [*sic*, not “subjective”

¹ Stephen Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000); but see also, as indications of recent work by mainstream Oxford philosophers, A.W. Moore, *Points of View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Hugh Rice, *God and Goodness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Bede Rundell, *Why there is Something rather than Nothing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004)—none of which is “talk about talk,” as the old jibe about philosophy at Oxford used to go.

² If the intellectual quality, or even the existence, of this work is doubted then the place for beginners to start is *A Companion to the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), surveying much more than the analytical allegiance of the editors might suggest.

as in the Libreria Editrice Vaticana translation!] certainty or a pragmatic sense of utility” (§47).³

While this means that excellent work is done, as the encyclical also notes (§5, 48), it means as well that participation in philosophical reflection, or even understanding of what is going on at the cutting edge, has become increasingly difficult for the amateur, or the outsider, in analytic philosophy. Sometimes, even philosophers adept in Thomistic thought seem to lack the training in philosophical logic to be able to engage. It would, on the other hand, be unfair to regard all analytical philosophers as logic-chopping technicians for whom their professional activities have no bearing on their “private” lives. For all that, however, we should have to acknowledge the absence of the “sapiential dimension” in their work: Their philosophizing seldom looks like “a practical wisdom and a school of life” (§37).⁴

It is a long-standing complaint that analytical philosophy deals only with trivial matters, or, to put it less pejoratively, restricts itself to piecemeal analyses of manageable topics. When the encyclical speaks of philosophers for whom “philosophy is expected to rest content with more modest tasks such as the simple interpretation of facts or enquiries into restricted fields of human knowing or its structures” (§55), it is not unreasonable to judge, as James McEvoy does, that the target is the dominant “analytic” tradition in English-speaking philosophy⁵—but can this really be so?

The text runs as follows: “An example of this is the deep-seated distrust of reason which has surfaced in the most recent developments of much of philosophical research, to the point where there is talk at times of “the end of metaphysics.” Philosophy is expected to rest content with more modest tasks such as the simple interpretation of facts or an enquiry into restricted fields of human knowing or its structures.”⁶

³ [V]eritatem ipsius causa inquirere desistentes, sibi hoc unum statuerunt ut objectivam certitudinem practicamve utilitatem obtinerent. (Since it is not so clear what is defective about seeking “objective certainty,” and the encyclical elsewhere is much concerned with the deficiencies of subjectivism, it may be the official Latin text that contradicts the author’s intention.)

⁴ It would have been difficult even to explain what this might mean but now we have Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, edited with an introduction by Arnold I. Davidson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995). Davidson holds a chair in philosophy at the University of Chicago.

⁵ *Restoring Faith in Reason: A New Translation of the Encyclical Letter Faith and Reason of Pope John Paul II together with a commentary and discussion*, ed. Laurence Paul Hemming and Susan Frank Parsons (London: SCM Press, 2000), 177.

⁶ “Talis est, exempli gratia, radicalis de ratione diffidentia. Quae recentes multarum inquisitionum philosophicarum explicationes contendunt. Hac de re compluribus ex partibus audita est vox de ‘interitu metaphysicae’: est voluntas ut philosophia tenuioribus muneribus contenta sit, quae tantum versetur in factis interpretandis

Thus, in much recent philosophy there is a “radical diffidence about reason.” We hear of “the end of metaphysics.” It is a matter of *will* that philosophers restrict themselves to “more modest tasks”—which turn out to be “interpreting facts,” or “investigating a number of the assured arguments of human knowledge or its structures.”

Well, these observations seem somewhat off the mark if they are aimed at analytical philosophy. “The end of metaphysics,” for example, is a slogan that most observers would associate with either Rudolf Carnap or Heidegger. In neither case did philosophy restrict itself to “modest tasks”: On the contrary, Carnap’s “scientific philosophy,” and Heidegger’s post-metaphysical *andenkendes Denken*, totally different from one another as they are, indeed at opposite ends of the spectrum, seem, to most analytical philosophers, the most extravagantly ambitious projects in twentieth-century philosophy!

Philosophy as “interpreting facts” McEvoy takes to be *positivism*. He allows, however, that this would not pass as a satisfactory account of what has been happening for many years in Anglo-American analytic philosophy: “[P]erhaps there is in general less consciousness in Rome of what goes on in English-speaking philosophy”—conceding, in effect, that only the German tradition from Nietzsche, Husserl et al. and its ramifications, is really in view in the encyclical.

The reason for this, McEvoy goes on to suggest, is that “positivism excepted, [English-speaking philosophy] must seem (and on the whole it undoubtedly is), much less ideological than were some prominent currents of continental European philosophy in the course of the twentieth century.”

That is a very interesting judgment. Obviously, apart from the scientific behaviorism in much philosophical anthropology, nothing in the profile of twentieth-century English-speaking philosophy compares with Marxism or post-Nietzschean nihilism as “worldviews.” On the other hand, no doubt, ideologies can be much more subtle and diffused: It would not be difficult to detect the liberal-capitalist individualism lurking in much Anglo-American analytic philosophy.

In short, analytic philosophy in the sense of current debates is never seriously confronted or even much mentioned in the encyclical—which means decades of fine work in most universities in the English-speaking world.

One cannot help regretting this. “Whereas almost all of Continental philosophy has gone ‘post modern,’ Anglo-American philosophy continues to defend truth and objectivity,” as John Greco says. “Ironically,

vel investigationibus de quibusdam certis argumentis humanae cognitionis vel ejusdem de structuris.”

analytic philosophy has become the natural ally of Thomism and Catholic philosophy.”⁷

Unfortunately, few on either side have noticed this.

The encyclical is far from negative about recent developments. The great merit of modern philosophy, indeed, is the focus on philosophical anthropology, on human subjectivity (§5). The down side of this, however, is the tendency to concentrate on *knowing* at the expense of the investigation of *being*: “While, on the one hand, philosophical thinking has succeeded in coming closer to the reality of human life and its forms of expression, it has also tended to pursue issues, existential, hermeneutical or linguistic, which ignore the radical question of the truth about personal existence, about being and about God.”⁸

As everyone knows, philosophy since Descartes has been concentrated on questions relating subjectivity, consciousness, knowing, etc., in continental as well as Anglo-American philosophy.

It is also true that the existentialist, hermeneutic, and linguistic schools bring philosophers, in various ways, closer to “human life and its forms of expression,” a fair enough rubric, anyway, for what analytic philosophers do.

It is also true, as already noted, that analytic-philosophical considerations bypass or neglect the big question about “the *truth* of human life, of existence and of God himself” (emphasis added). Philosophy, after all, the encyclical insists, is concerned above all with the question of *truth* (§25–33).

Fair enough—yet, for analytical philosophers, it might seem that the history of anglophone philosophy in the second half of the twentieth century could be written round the question of truth introduced onto the agenda, principally, by Michael Dummett in an epoch-making essay in 1959.⁹

⁷ John Greco, “Thomism and the Future of Catholic Philosophy,” *New Blackfriars* 80 (1999): 182.

⁸ “[C]um hinc philosophica investigatio iam in illam viam se inserere potuit, quae propiorem eam reddit ad hominum vitam eiusque formas expressas, illinc tamen eadem inquisitio explicare iam vult deliberationes existenciales, hermeneuticas vel linguisticas quae alienae sunt a fundamentali hac quaestione de veritate cuiusque hominis vitae, exsistentiae atque Dei ipsius.”

⁹ Michael Dummett, “Truth,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 59 (1957): 141–62; reprinted in his *Truth and Other Enigmas* (London: Duckworth, 1978). For an introduction to the status quaestionis today, see Truth ed. Simon Blackburn and Keith Simmons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999): an anthology of the classical interventions from F.H. Bradley, H.H. Joachim, William James, and Bertrand Russell, via Frege, F.P. Ramsey, Wittgenstein, Tarski, and Quine, then the Oxford debate between P.F. Strawson and J.L. Austin (1950), through to

Some analytic philosophers may well distrust the idea of propositions that are universally and absolutely true or false; others may be attracted to the notion that truth is born of consensus (§56)—but they have to contend with colleagues who utterly reject such views. Indeed, this is the decisive point: In analytic philosophy these last fifty years there has been *no* generally accepted theory of truth. On the contrary, many different accounts of truth have been tabled over the years. First-year philosophy students have to consider the range of options between coherence and correspondence theories of truth. At the most sophisticated level, in the debates in metaphysics over realism and anti-realism, the question of truth is central. Dummett's contribution has been to reconstruct the ancient debate between realism and idealism in terms precisely of truth, arguing that the debate is best construed as between those who hold that there may be truths that transcend our methods of verification and those who hold by contrast that it makes no sense to posit such truths (inclining toward positivism nowadays rather than absolute idealism).

Quasi-verificationist, redundancy, and eliminativist theories of truth circulate in the literature. These may indeed predominate. In some versions they may sometimes resemble post-Nietzschean disenchantment with the very idea of truth, if of course in an entirely different terminology. This does not mean, however, that philosophers have altogether given up realist conceptions of truth and objectivity. Far from it. Major philosophers such as Donald Davidson, Hilary Putnam, and Thomas Nagel, as well as Michael Dummett, have been working for decades on the classical problems of truth and objectivity, much more respectfully and assiduously, one might think, than some of their better known coevals in the continental tradition.¹⁰

Again, "current developments in hermeneutics and the analysis of language yield great results, helpful for the understanding of faith, since they bring to light the structures of our thought and speech and the meaning which language bears" (§84)—but if "the analysis of language" (*variae sermonis humani pervestigaciones*) might sound like a reference to "linguistic analysis," and thus to Anglo-American philosophy, it has to be said that, if these investigations "lay bare the structure of human thought and expression and all the meaning enclosed in language," many leading philosophers, starting with the later Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin, would jib at such an account of their work. In fact, the allusion is probably to semiotics, semantics, linguistics, Saussure, and such like—again very much a continental agenda.

recent work by well-known Anglo-American philosophers. (Michael Dummett, by the way, is a devout Catholic.)

¹⁰ Jürgen Habermas excepted.

Finally, in this summary account of possible references, there is this passage: “[L]ogic, philosophy of language, epistemology, philosophy of nature, anthropology, a more profound investigation of the affective character of knowledge and an existential approach to the analysis of freedom.” This sounds very much like what analytic philosophers have been doing over the past thirty or forty years. These developments are all good, “yet since the nineteenth century the affirmation of the principle of immanence, which is a sort of basis to the claims of rationalism, has provoked the profoundest doubting of claims once thought indisputable . . . so currents of irrationalism have arisen, while at the same time critical judgement has shown the emptiness of the claims of the absolute domination of reason . . . some more subtle writers have labeled the age ‘post modern’ . . . the expression comes from aesthetics, social and technological agendas, it remains ambiguous, nevertheless the reasons and reflections which refer to the area of post modernity always merit serious consideration.”

To anyone familiar with the analytic tradition this seems a comment once again entirely about post-Nietzschean philosophy in the continental tradition.

Partly, no doubt, when we look for an explanation of this absence of interest, it may be supposed that, for observers of modern philosophy from a continental perspective, as perhaps those who helped Pope John Paul II to draft the encyclical, analytical philosophy is regarded as basically logical positivism.

Historically, positivism in the style of Comte, its progenitor, never took hold in English-language philosophy; it was very much a “continental” adventure (often openly anti-Catholic).

Logical positivism was a different matter. This movement was also, of course, “continental” in origin: Rooted in the work of the Vienna Circle (Carnap, Weigl, Neurath, and others), it was translated to Oxford by A. J. Ayer, in his *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936) and, more widely, and much more influentially, by members of the group (Carnap and Feigl) who found refuge from Nazism in the United States.

The most characteristic doctrine of logical positivism is the verification principle: the denial of literal or cognitive meaning to any statement that is not empirically verifiable. In terms of the encyclical, however, it was never limited to “simple interpretation of facts.” Nor could it be described as resting content with a quite modest task. On the contrary, logical positivism is one of the most ambitious projects in twentieth-century philosophy (the scientism mentioned in §88).

Rudolf Carnap (1891–1970) taught at Chicago and Los Angeles from 1935 onward. He had immense influence on the development of philos-

ophy in North America. In his first great work, *Der logische Aufbau der Welt* (1928), he combines an empiricism much more governed by the hard sciences than any empiricism espoused by British philosophers in the wake of Locke or Hume. Powering himself with the logical apparatus provided by Frege and Russell, Carnap produced logical positivism in its most classical form. This phenomenalist reduction of all objects of knowledge delivered the solipsistic basis of the construction of the external world that the encyclical seems to allude to (§82)—against which, however, much analytic philosophy has contended for half a century.

The greatest American-born philosopher of the second half of the twentieth century, Willard van Orman Quine (1908–2002) spent a postgraduate year in Europe with Carnap and (in Warsaw) with Tarski. He dominated American philosophy for the next forty years, developing his own distinctive approach in logic, semantics, epistemology, and philosophy of science, much too complex to reduce to a simple formula, yet always unmistakably indebted (as he would not have denied) to logical positivism.

Quine held that the only languages that are suitable for literal and true description of the world are those of mathematics and science. He had a holistic view of verification, conceiving of a body of knowledge in terms of a web touching experience at the edge but with each point connected by a network of relations to other points. He is famous for the view that epistemology should be naturalized, with the object of investigation being the relationship, in human beings, between the inputs of experience and the outputs of belief. While nuancing would be required in a longer account, it seems not unfair to describe Quine's philosophy as scientism and behaviorism.

That twentieth-century American philosophy has been shaped by Carnap and Quine is undeniable—but from the beginning their views have been resisted. In England, in particular, where Carnap left little trace, the asylum-seeking Austrians who took up permanent residence, Wittgenstein and Friedrich Waismann, were both vigorously and steadfastly opposed to scientism and behaviorism. Ayer's little book had an unjustifiably intimidatory effect on philosophical theology, perhaps into the 1960s; but it rapidly lost credibility among philosophers in Cambridge, Oxford, and elsewhere. Theologians were just slow to catch up. By 1947, however, in Oxford at least, Ayer was more celebrated for the destructive analysis of his book *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge* (1940), which was pursued in lectures by J. L. Austin, the paradigm of the "linguistic analyst."¹¹

¹¹ These lectures, frequently repeated, given at the University of California in 1958 and for the last time in Oxford in 1959, the year before his early death, were

For all the absence of any sustained logical positivism, it is not mistaken to believe that, from the 1920s onward, philosophers in the United Kingdom, and eventually all over the English-speaking world, often scoffed at “metaphysics.” Thus, one might conclude, philosophers brought up in the analytic tradition could have little or nothing to contribute to renewal of the philosophy of being within the Christian metaphysical tradition (cf. §97).

We need, however, to ask what it was that was rejected.

At Cambridge both G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell were once enthusiastic admirers of Hegel, as were most philosophers in Oxford also and in the Scottish universities, before 1914. Skepticism about the claims of German idealism as represented by Hegel, Schelling, and Fichte, was already under way (not unconnected with hatred of “German imperialism”). By the 1930s, while philosophers continued to study and admire Plato and Aristotle, often attracted by their metaphysical writings, the word “metaphysics” had largely become associated with German idealism—and had become an extremely negative and pejorative term.

There is a significant difference between Moore and Russell in their anti-metaphysical philosophies. For Moore metaphysics could not survive appeal to common sense; for Russell, on the other hand, the appeal was to logic: “The business of philosophy, as I conceive it, is essentially that of logical analysis, followed by logical synthesis. . . . Although . . . comprehensive construction is part of the business of philosophy, I do not believe it is the most important part. The most important part, to my mind, consists in criticizing and clarifying notions that are apt to be regarded as fundamental and accepted uncritically. As instances I might mention: mind, matter, consciousness, knowledge, experience, causality, will, time. I believe all these notions to be inexact and approximate, essentially infected with vagueness, incapable of forming part of any exact science.”¹² In many ways Russell’s early work could easily count as “metaphysics,” though he preferred to call it “logic.”

Wittgenstein early and late reacted against Russell’s conception of philosophy. He came to think that his own *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

reconstructed by his colleague G. J. Warnock and appeared in 1962 as *Sense and Sensibilia*—the classical demolition of one of the most typical conceptions of perception as requiring some intermediary entity (impressions, sense data, etc.) between the perceiver and the object perceived; it should be of great interest to students of St. Thomas; it is at least as important as the so-called “speech act theory” developed from Austin’s William James Lectures at Harvard, *How to do things with words*, also published posthumously in 1962.

¹² Bertrand Russell, “Logical atomism,” in *Contemporary British Philosophy*, ed. J. H. Muirhead (London: 1924).

was a piece of “metaphysics,” understood pejoratively—contending, in his later work, that “what *we* do is bring words like being, knowledge, intentionality and so on back from their metaphysical use to how they are used in the language in which they are at home” (*Investigations* §116; emphasis added).

This may well sound anti-metaphysical but there again one needs to ask what the objectionable metaphysical uses are. Wittgenstein is, after all, on record expressing his respect for the profundity of Kant and Berkeley. His later work wrestles indefatigably with Descartes, Hume, William James, and Russell, as well as the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle. He attacks both subjectivism and scientism—but since these were, for him, metaphysical fantasies generated by fantasies of language he could not think of metaphysics except negatively.

By 1959, however, in the work of Peter Strawson, metaphysics was already back on the agenda in British philosophy, at Oxford specifically, and as a Good Thing—both “descriptive metaphysics” and “revisionary metaphysics.”¹³

True, when Anglo-American philosophers publish books of metaphysics these days, it is most commonly metaphysics at the service of naturalism or physicalism. Their adherents would regard these as substantive metaphysical views of the world. It may well be, then, in the English-speaking world, if we do not turn our backs on analytic philosophers, that the substantive metaphysics that we need for Catholic Christian theology is what we work out dialectically against—for example—any version of physicalism. This is the view that the real world is nothing more than the physical world. Often, perhaps usually, this comes out as the doctrine that everything that can be truly said is said in the language of physics. The nearer we get to the basic physical constituents the more we have of the truth of how things are. In philosophical psychology the more we know about how the brain works the more we understand about people.

Compared with some of the post-Nietzschean accounts of the world as constructed or projected into existence by the human mind, with the doctrines of cultural relativism that often accompany this, one might be allowed to think that grounding one’s view of the world on the physical world, for all the scientistic and reductionist assumptions in this enterprise, offers a much more solid and congenial starting point for discussion for those who believe the world to be created. At least physicalist metaphysics will be unlikely to lend credence to relativistic doctrines according to

¹³ Peter F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (London: Methuen, 1959).

which the world is how we make it up, or according to which there is no one true version of the world at all. Engaging in dialectic with some versions of physicalism, that is to say, might be more fruitful than trying to understand even sober forms of cultural relativism. It would not be unprecedented. St. Thomas Aquinas himself, after all, introduces the conception of the natural order that he needs for expounding Christian doctrine precisely by recapitulating the history of pre-Aristotelian naturalism, incorporating and transcending it.

The encyclical is pretty sketchy about the details of the recommended philosophy of being—*perquisitiones in ipsum "esse"* (§5). We really need an appendix of exemplary books or papers.

It is clear what the question is: "[T]he question of the meaning of things and of their very existence . . . the quest for meaning which has always compelled the human heart . . . the question of life's meaning and an answer to it" (§1, 3).

One example of what this yields positively is "the basic form of philosophical knowledge which is evident to this day in the postulates which inspire national and international legal systems in regulating the life of society" (§3)—thus human rights, natural rights, and so on.¹⁴

More in tune with standard expectations, the pope makes the following request: "Consider for example [so this isn't intended as an exhaustive list] the principles of non-contradiction, finality and causality, as well as the concept of the person as a free and intelligent subject with the capacity to know God, truth and goodness. . . . Consider as well certain fundamental moral norms which are shared by all" (§4).

In other words, we are to consider the topics that are, as it happens, already on the agenda nowadays in any department of analytical philosophy. Moreover, in any good university bookstore there will be shelves of textbooks introducing metaphysics, philosophical anthropology, and ethics, discussing all these issues, perhaps even including the question of the knowability of God—though that, as we have already noted, would usually be little developed but left to the specialists in the philosophy of religion.

More specifically, in connection with St. Thomas (§44), we are directed to consider the realism that recognizes the objectivity of truth and produces not merely a philosophy of "what seems to be" but a philosophy of "what is," very much a concern in analytic philosophy (phenomenalism versus realism, in the jargon).

¹⁴ Of course a philosophy of human rights emerging from the philosophy of being would not be greeted with unanimous delight by all Catholic thinkers about these matters, some of whom would agree with Jeremy Bentham's famous dismissal of the very idea of natural rights as "nonsense upon stilts."

Specifically again, the pope refers to the need for a discipline of ethics which is neither subjective nor utilitarian, which looks to philosophical anthropology—and at the same time involves a metaphysical treatment of the good (cf §98). (We shall come back to that.)

In these recommendations we certainly pick up themes central to controversies in mainstream analytic philosophy, for the past half-century. Yet, we have a problem. What is this philosophy of being, *philosophia respiciens “esse”* (§76)? In detail, what is *philosophia essendi* (§97), which, “within the perspective of the Christian metaphysical tradition, . . . is an active or dynamic philosophy which presents truth in its ontological, causal and communicative structures, retrieving its impetus and perennial impulse in the very fact that it is upheld by the act of ‘being’ and as a result it possesses a complete and general access to a solid universe of things and goes beyond every limit to arrive at Him in whom the consummation of all things is attained.”

Here, in a footnote, we are referred to the pope’s address at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas in Rome, in November 1979. Here, we are advised, the philosophy of St. Thomas needs to be studied attentively and accepted with conviction by reason of its spirit of openness and of universalism—“an openness to the whole of reality in all its parts and dimension, without either reducing reality or confining thought to particular forms or aspects (and without turning singular aspects into absolutes), as intelligence demands in the name of objective and integral truth about what is real. . . . The basis and source of this openness lie in the fact that the philosophy of St. Thomas is a philosophy of being, that is, of the *actus essendi* whose transcendental value paves the most direct way to rise to the knowledge of subsisting Being and pure Act, namely to God.”

Once again, then, the metaphysics of being that the pope has in mind does not stop short of theistic considerations. Indeed, he goes much further: “[W]e can even call this philosophy the philosophy of the proclamation of being, a chant in praise of what exists . . . *filosofia della proclamazione dell’essere, il canto in onore dell’esistente*.”¹⁵ This wonderful phrase takes us back to G. K. Chesterton’s wonderful little book on St. Thomas (1933), in which he speaks of the praise of Being, by St. Thomas, as the praise of God as the creator of the world. In short, on this understanding of the question of being, there is no metaphysics that stops short of natural theology, no philosophy of being that does not culminate in a song of praise, no ontology without doxology.

¹⁵ *Angelicum* 57 (1980): 121–46.

Philosophers, Catholics included, working in the analytic tradition, are likely to find the move from philosophy of being to chanting the praises of being almost unthinkable.

There are splendid expositions of the philosophy of St. Thomas, by Joseph Owens and John F. Wippel to name only the most obvious; but for colleagues in departments in which analytic philosophy sets the standards of rigor, clarity, and sobriety, I can think of no recent book in English that I could recommend as exemplifying metaphysics as praise of being (whatever one may find in French, German, Spanish, Italian, or Polish).

It might be argued, on the other hand, that no textbook can take the place of a course of lectures—that metaphysics is, precisely, not a body of knowledge to be imparted (like British history, physiology, or quantum mechanics) but an activity—a way of being in the world—into which one is best initiated in face-to-face exchange, conversation, discussion, “dialogue” (not forgetting prayer and penance, cf *Fides et Ratio* §105, the wonderful citation from St. Bonaventure’s *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*).

This might not be uncongenial. Wittgenstein, after all, maintained that “philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity” (*Tractatus* 4.112)—a conviction only confirmed in his later work.

On the other hand, as noted, there are dozens of textbooks of metaphysics currently available, mostly the byproduct of courses taught in English speaking universities. Books cannot do it all but they can help. In principle, it surely seems, there is no reason why there should not be textbooks outlining the philosophy of being, as there used to be expositions of *philosophia ad mentem sancti Thomae*.

And yet—according to Christopher Martin, who has clearly worked through them, the textbooks of Thomistic philosophy, “though crammed with valuable Thomist content . . . do . . . by their very form as textbooks falsify the nature of philosophy as an inquiry.”¹⁶

As John Haldane has insisted, it is a mistake to regard analytic philosophy as inherently antimetaphysical, skeptical, and nihilist—rather, he says, it “has a claim to be the prime continuant of Western philosophical rationalism.”¹⁷

On the other hand, talk about “being” remains baffling for most analytic philosophers. Haldane’s lecture never once mentions the word “being.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Christopher Martin, *New Blackfriars* 80 (1999): 190.

¹⁷ John Haldane, *New Blackfriars* 80 (1999): 170.

¹⁸ Indeed in this entire issue, authored by Timothy Chappell, Dagfinn Føllesdal, Bas C. van Fraassen, John Greco, Bonnie Kent, Christopher Martin, Ralph McInerny, Hayden Ramsay, Nicholas Rescher, Thomas D. Sullivan, Charles Taylor, Linda Trinkhaus Zagzebski, and Haldane himself, no one sees any need to mention the word “being”!

Indeed, none of the philosophers whom he assembled to reflect on Thomism in the context of analytical philosophy felt any need to mention the word—whether they avoided it deliberately or quite without thinking (which would be even more revealing).

We have some way yet to go, in the Anglo-American tradition, to feel free to speak of “Being.” We need, the pope says (§83), a philosophy of genuinely metaphysical range, “capable, that is, of transcending empirical data, in order to attain something absolute, ultimate and foundational in its search for truth.” There is a “requirement,” as he says, which is “implicit in sapiential and analytical knowledge alike” “a requirement for knowing the moral good, which has its ultimate foundation in the Supreme Good, God himself.”¹⁹ We need “a philosophical ethics which looks to the truth of the good, to an ethics which is neither subjectivist nor utilitarian. Such an ethics implies and presupposes a philosophical anthropology and a metaphysics of the good.”²⁰

For most philosophers in the analytic tradition this metaphysics of the good seems to move too rapidly into Christian theology. There may be residual Protestant Christian suspicions of the Catholic doctrine of grace building on nature (cf. §43), the idea that philosophy as sapiential should be consonant with biblical wisdom such that philosophers may be summoned to engage in the search for the natural foundation of this meaning, which corresponds to the religious impulse innate in every person (§81). In effect, if some such genesis is a plausible story, reluctance on the part of analytical philosophers (including some who are Catholics in “private” life) to extend their reflections into a philosophical consideration of *actus essendi* may be an unwitting endorsement of the dualism between reason and revelation, nature and grace, so decisive for the parting of the ways in western Christianity since the sixteenth century. After all, analytical philosophy is most at home in the universities that long ago slipped out of communion with the Catholic Church: It is perhaps to be expected that analytical philosophers would on the whole prefer to regard the question of God as purely a matter of faith.

¹⁹ “[O]pus est philosophia naturae vere metaphysicae, quae excedere nempe valeat empirica indicia ut, veritatem conquirens, ad aliquid absolutum ultimum, fundamentale pertingat. Haec postulatio iam implicita reperitur in cognitionibus indolis sapientialis tum etiam analyticae; est necessitas praesertim cognitionum de bono morali cujus extremum fundamentum est Bonum supremum, Deus ipse. . . . Ubicumque praesentem quandam appellationem ad absolutum et transcendens detegit homo, inibi ei aperitur indicatio metaphysicae rerum interpretationis: in veritate ac pulchritudine, in bonis moralibus ac personis ceteris, in esse ac in Deo.”

²⁰ “[H]aec postulata ethica ratio importat atque ante flagitat philosophicam anthropologiam nec non metaphysicam bonorum tractationem.”

Obviously, also, most analytical philosophers take it for granted that Kant was right, in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) to rule out the versions of metaphysics that purport to establish doctrines about the nature of the soul, the constitution of an independent order of space and time, and the knowability of God. In another way, that is to say, this is only to entrench the gulf between reason and revelation, and thus leave all talk of God to the faithful.

Paradoxically, of course, for the Thomist, at least “of the strict observance,” this gulf between reason and revelation—more specifically between a philosophy engaged in coming to terms with the allurements of physicalism and the assumption so happily made by many theologians that all talk of God is indeed pure fideism—could easily become the common ground on which discussion might arise. True, the encyclical *Fides et Ratio* keeps insisting on the way in which metaphysics, and specifically the philosophy of *esse*, should be allowed to spread over into fundamental theology; one might, on the other hand, be happy to delay the introduction of theistic considerations in favor of saying as much as possible within the ambit of a naturalistic ontology and philosophical anthropology. Since analytic metaphysicians are unlikely to turn to natural theology in great numbers in the proximate future, we really have no alternative—unless, of course, we prefer to keep aloof.

Yet, if a philosophy of *esse* seems unlikely to emerge soon, we may already have the makings of a metaphysics of the good, such as the pope envisages.

Of course God is identified by St. Thomas as *ipsum esse subsistens*. In the *secunda pars* of the *Summa theologiae*, however, as often elsewhere, in what we might call his outline of philosophical anthropology (the subject as moral agent), it is God as *beatitudo* on whom the focus lies. God as the sovereign good, *summum bonum*, the good that generously and graciously diffuses itself in creating the world (and so on).

We surely could, in a totally non-Christian academic environment, get ethics going in terms of human orientation to the Good,—which is, anyway, basically what several philosophers in the analytic mode have been doing for decades.

Iris Murdoch, to start with, in her lecture “The sovereignty of good over other concepts,” then in the Gifford lectures she gave in Edinburgh, *Metaphysics as a guide for morals*, says that of course we cannot believe the Christian story any longer. How could God (under any description) ever become one of us: a man, a Jewish prophet, in an out of the way part of the world, in the year 4 B.C. (etc)—“the scandal of particularity”? Yet, she insists, we surely don’t invent our ethical standards for ourselves: There are certain givens. We can’t do just what we like with our nature, certain

features are given; we don't make up morality as we go along, or from scratch, or as whatever suits us.²¹

For Murdoch, then, there is no biblical revelation—yet on the other hand there is no settling for nihilism either. For Murdoch we need to get back to Plato: Morals need metaphysics; it is a frighteningly practical matter for her. The social order is collapsing because people don't acknowledge certain standards, which are effectively Plato's forms of the good, the true, and the beautiful. We have to free ourselves of centuries of Christian interpretation of Plato: Just let us get back to a pre-Christian understanding of how human lives are always already, mysteriously, directed, motivated, by a congenital insatiable desire for the true, the good, and the beautiful. In the professional philosophical literature Murdoch is a precursor, an example of realism in ethics—moral realism, one way of heading off subjectivism, projectivism, emotivism, and so on.²²

For the realist in ethics, we don't invent our standards and paradigms of the good, or project them out of our own resources, we *discover* them. Of course we have to work at this, it is a training, an asceticism—Murdoch insists on this very strongly. It is like Plato's metaphysical ascent story in the *Symposium*, always her model even when she doesn't say so—you gradually painfully move from attraction to this or that finite particular good or value or ideal and are drawn on, onward and upward, to uncover, unveil, the ultimate truth and beauty.

The problem (to my mind) with Murdoch's Plato is that, while of course he is pre- and non-Christian, he is nevertheless a profoundly religious thinker. (Surely Murdoch is correct: that Plato is "just a philosopher" is a very modern idea.) The ascent by asceticism to vision of the form of the Good, even in this life (not that for her there is any other), is an appeal to a religious conception that scares off many analytical philosophers.²³

²¹ Iris Murdoch, no doubt much better known as a (too prolific?) novelist, published three important papers before she abandoned her academic career: "The Idea of Perfection," "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts," and "On 'God' and 'Good'" in the 1960s, reprinting them as *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970). Her Gifford lectures at Edinburgh in 1982 eventually appeared as *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), something of a "loose and baggy monster."

²² See J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (1977); Simon Blackburn, *Being Good: An Introduction to Philosophy* (2001).

²³ Nevertheless Murdoch's early papers have exerted a great deal of influence: see, for example, Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (1981), Sabina Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination in Ethics* (1983), Charles Taylor *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (1989); *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, ed. Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (1996); Maria Antonaccio, *Picturing the*

However—there were *three* young women philosophers in Oxford in the 1950s, colleagues and friends, each engaged in quite distinct ways in chipping away at the foundations of the dominant forms of ethics.

Elizabeth Anscombe, in a famous essay on modern moral philosophy, barely mentions utilitarianism,²⁴ regarding it as beneath serious attention, placing the focus on Kant, deontology, versions of ethics that, as she contends, depend consciously or otherwise on divine law doctrines. Since moral philosophers have mostly all stopped believing in God as a lawgiver (she attributes this, perhaps a little hastily, to the Reformation, denying that Christ is our judge), they should also drop talking about obligation, conscience, duty and responsibility, and so forth, about what you “ought” to do. All this is dependent on biblical doctrines (God as the one to whom we are accountable, to whom we are indebted, etc.)—without biblical theism there is no basis for deontological ethics. Thus, having given up God, let philosophers return to Aristotle—to rediscover a philosophical anthropology that includes a metaphysics of the good.

The third young philosopher in Oxford in the 1950s was Philippa Foot.²⁵ In a stream of important papers, starting in 1961 with “Goodness and choice,” including two important critiques of Nietzsche, she has played a decisive role in the revival of so-called “virtue ethics.”

Foot’s first (and no doubt last!) book of 120 pages summing up her life’s work, *Natural Goodness*, appeared in her 80th year—and the first person she mentions in the preface is Anscombe: “It will be obvious that I owe most to the work of Elizabeth Anscombe and to early discussions with her.” Interestingly, indeed quite movingly, Foot’s gratitude as a philosopher goes above all to the devout Catholic Anscombe, and one cannot doubt that Foot herself is manifestly a happy-go-lucky pagan. They are on the same side against subjectivism, emotivism, among others; and they agree that Aristotle’s naturalistic ethics is where we should now start.

What Foot is doing then is getting back to the idea that there is a close connection between human happiness and virtue but she is doing it as if Christianity never existed.

Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch (2000); Hilary Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays* (2002).

²⁴ “Modern moral philosophy,” originally in *Philosophy* 33 (1958), reprinted in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, vol. III (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), 26–42, introducing the term “consequentialism,” 36 (“a shallow philosophy”).

²⁵ Philippa Bosanquet, granddaughter of Grover Cleveland and long since divorced from M. R. D. Foot the historian, has published two collections of papers, *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (1978) and *Moral Dilemmas and Other Topics in Moral Philosophy* (2002) besides *Natural Goodness* (2001).

Happiness and virtue are. Once we understand how human goodness depends on the nature of our species—she puts “life” at the center, takes “life” as her focus—then we can see that the claim a human action or disposition is good or bad of its kind is simply a claim about a given feature of a certain kind of living thing. Describe the kind of animal we are and you will see this.

Foot inveighs against subjectivism, the dominant conception of ethics in analytic philosophy for sixty years, as she allows (A. J. Ayer, J. L. Mackie, Simon Blackburn). All these forms of “non cognitivism” in morals she traces to the philosophy of David Hume and thus the fact/value dichotomy. But do we always separate facts from values? On the contrary, reflection on common experience indicates that we do not; indeed we are usually interested in the facts only because of their significance. Following one of the later Wittgenstein’s methods, Foot reminds us of what she hopes we shall agree is the kind of thing we say in ordinary everyday circumstances.

Referring us to another famous essay by Anscombe, “On promising,”²⁶ Foot asks us to recall that it is facts about human life that make it necessary for human beings to make promises, to be able to bind each other to action through institutions, practices, customs, and so on, such that there few other ways in which one person can reliably get another to do what he or she wants. This is another typical Wittgensteinian move, inviting one to move away from dwelling on one’s own inner experience to look at the practices and institutions that one inhabits and without which one would have no interesting inner experiences anyway.

Promising is not “a convention,” if by that you mean a rule we could alter or do without; it is what Anscombe calls an “Aristotelian necessity,” meaning by this that, just as it is necessary for plants to have water, for birds to build nests, for wolves to hunt in packs and so on, all depending on what the kind of plants or animals need, in their natural habitats, and the ways of making out that are within their physical and mental repertoire, such things determine what it is for members of that species to be as they should be, and to do what they should do. This “should,” this “ought,” is now grounded in the “necessities” of the nature of that species—it is not an “ought” issuing supernaturally from divine command nor on the other hand is it merely a convention that human beings could choose to alter at will.

We humans don’t need to be able to dive like gannets, Foot says; nor to see in the dark like owls; but our remembering and focusing, our memory and concentration, have to be such as to allow us to pick up language; our

²⁶ G. E. M. Anscombe, “On Promising and its Justice, and whether it need be respected in *foro interno*,” originally in *Critica* 3 (1960), reprinted in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, vol. III (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), 10–21.

balance such that we eventually learn to stand and walk; our sight such that we can recognize faces at a glance; and so forth. Human parents are just defective if they do not teach their young the skills human young need to survive—as a lioness teaches her young. Of course it is vastly more complicated, human beings are very different from other beings. Yet, Foot anticipates, anyone who thinks about it can see that, for human beings, teaching their young what promising is, for example, and a whole lot of other social skills, is *necessary*—“how could we manage, for example, if there were no way of making appointments, being punctual”—simple ordinary everyday things—“how could we survive without justice?”

The moral virtues, then, are “Aristotelian necessities”: The kind of life we humans live necessitates practices, dispositions, cultivated and settled, skills, virtues, such as being able to make and keep promises. Morality is grounded in our biological nature. What is “good” is what is “necessary” for our kind of animal to flourish, indeed to survive.

There is no problem about how to justify morals, either claiming that a course of action is right because it produces the happiest consequences, or because we hear God commanding it. For Foot it is right because it is what you need to do given the kind of animal you are. There is no problem about what is “morally good,” indeed you can take the word “moral” out of our discourse—it adds nothing, you don’t need it, it only adds confusion; it is not in Aristotle.²⁷

This is not to say that objections cannot be brought, or difficulties imagined, against Foot’s argument. Obviously, her neo-Aristotelianism offers a persuasive way of avoiding the range of different doctrines from utilitarianism via emotivism to fideistic divine command ethics, all of which, in their way, attempt to do without the concept of human nature and its orientation to the good.

This naturalistic view of ethics, as she calls it, Foot finds in Thomas Aquinas: The nature of our kind requires, enables, and allows us to do this and that, to be this or that, and that is how we flourish, that is how we are happy, that is how we are good—in short, goodness, happiness, virtue, and human nature are inseparable. These concepts are internally related, they form a structure that it is not too difficult to envisage as the ground on which to develop a metaphysics of the sovereignty of Good.

²⁷ The word “moral” has been so blighted by Kantian deontological talk and (even more) by guilt-inducing pietism that perhaps the best course is to suspend the use of the word, as Anscombe virtually suggests, until it has been freed of that over-layer and returned to something more like Thomas Aquinas’s usage: The word “*moralis*” equals “*voluntarius*” or “*humanus*”—an action is “moral” if it is freely chosen in accordance with our rational nature.

What Thomas Aquinas adds to this naturalistic account is of course that we are created in the image of God, God understood in faith as Trinity of persons, this communion of bliss which by grace human beings may be invited, called, to participate in. Foot shows no interest in going that far: She shows no sympathy with Iris Murdoch's quasi-religious Platonism nor is she ever dismissive of religion in the way in which some influential moral philosophers are (Mackie and Blackburn). (Perhaps her many conversations with Anscombe left Foot respectful of beliefs she never felt attracted by herself.) Thomas Aquinas's discussion, in the *secunda pars*, is "a wonderful piece of moral philosophy," as she says;²⁸ opening up the possibility, anyway, of an analytical-philosophical ethics of the good that would not be too difficult to relate, however cautiously, to a metaphysics of being.

In conclusion: though there is much for analytical philosophers who are themselves Catholics to learn from the encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, the perspective of the document seems to conceal the fine work done in the Anglo-American analytical tradition over at least the last half century. In particular, it is the clash of views, the conflict of positions, in metaphysics as in ethics, that characterizes this tradition. Many of these views are as incompatible with the truths of Catholic Christian faith as any in the nihilistic and relativistic tradition of post-Nietzschean philosophy. On the other hand, physicalism in metaphysics and naturalism in ethics offer highly congenial starting points for discussion between analytical philosophers and Thomists. While we have discovered, in recent years, that there is much more to "Thomism" than "Aristotelianism," the possibility lies open for a re-engagement with Aristotle's philosophy in ways that could bring Thomists and some analytical philosophers together to find common ground, in the midst of the "crisis of meaning" which Pope John Paul II discerns (§81).²⁹

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²⁸ *Natural Goodness*, 73.

²⁹ For related discussion, see my "Aquinas and Analytic Philosophy: Natural Allies?," *Modern Theology* 20 (2004): 123–39. For an exemplary demonstration of philosophical work that demonstrates complete command both of analytical philosophical and Thomist ways of thinking see John P. O'Callaghan, *Thomist Realism and the Linguistic Turn: Toward a More Perfect Form of Existence* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003).

