

What Has Analytic Philosophy to Do with Thomism?

Response to Alfred J. Freddoso

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NO ONE CAN RIGHTLY DENY that there are important strengths of modern analytic philosophy. It places emphasis on clarity of definitions, rigor of argumentation and its logical forms, the centrality of empirical features of our experience, ordinary language as a key to thinking about reality, and a strong attentiveness to the modern sciences and their discoveries. In addition, at least some analytic philosophers in recent years have been busy rehabilitating a series of important classical themes that are of a metaphysical character, for example: the consideration of essences or natures, the reality of causality, and the notion of capacities inherent in larger substantial wholes (which is another way of speaking of potencies inherent in things). And we could even say that a whole branch of religious thought has opened up within analytic circles, attentive to issues such as reasoned argument for the existence of God, divine eternity and divine knowledge, the problem of evil, the metaphysics of the soul, religious experience, and the question of the truth of Christianity. This is all quite valuable.

However, we might consider here briefly at least three significant weaknesses that also should be named. First, analytic philosophy, at least in its early twenty-first-century instantiation has had difficulty assuring the centrality of philosophy in the life of the contemporary university. Arguably, this is because it has not succeeded in providing a unifying theory for the diverse forms of learning that are pursued in the university. Take for example your standard undergraduate course

schedule: Introduction to Medieval Chinese Literature, Calculus II, the History of Early Islam, Evolutionary Theory, Readings in Feminism from de Beauvoir to Irigaray. If the student asks him- or herself, “what holds all these disciplines together, epistemologically?” or “what makes for a synthetic point of view to understand the unity of various forms of learning and rationality?” or “What allows us to adjudicate between diverse fields of learning in the contemporary university?” . . . what course should he or she take in an analytic philosophy department to find out the answer? Typically, I think we would not find one. This means that contemporary philosophy is failing to articulate to the university why the university exists, or how the universality of knowledge exists—how all the bodies of knowledge correlate within a larger whole and what for. And if philosophy cannot do this, no other discipline can. Political liberalism and post-modern semiotic theory cannot do it. So, as long as analytic philosophy continues to predominate in universities with this aforementioned absence, they (the universities) will have a multitude of exciting selling points, but one fears that they will not have a soul. The technical and scientific, economic and legal prowess may advance. The fundraising may continue. Grants for scientific research projects will be given. But the center will be lacking. The heart of a classical education is based on the search for truth about the meaning of the whole, and this search is frequently absent in contemporary education, as the modern university becomes driven primarily by concerns for professional formation and cooperation with the culture of technological efficiency.

A second point can be stated more briefly, but it is related: analytic philosophy has an ambiguous relationship with the modern sciences. On the one hand, it is frequently employed to promote the discoveries of quantum physics, evolutionary theory, and neuroscience as these harbingers of progress usher us into the modern scientific age, assisted by philosophy, which has become increasingly the handmaiden of the modern sciences. On the other hand, modern philosophers can have a difficult time explaining why these scientific disciplines should not simply supplant philosophy entirely as an explanatory discipline. Extreme versions of eliminative physicalism provide a noteworthy case. Philosophers exert great mental effort to explain, in effect, how their discipline can be supplanted by being reduced to neurobiology and chemistry and, in seeking to do so, fail in truth to succeed (because modern scientific studies of physical phenomena can never be invoked to explain comprehensively distinctively human modes of conceptual thought). And thus, they illustrate negatively and inadvertently

the irreducibility of philosophical human experience to the limited competencies of modern science. And yet they view this failure with regret or hope of eventual success. Ironically, it is as if someone were in perpetual frustration that he failed to attain to a stable form of life because he could not successfully commit suicide! But what about the classical alternative? What if there is a deepest level of reality that is attained to by the mind only philosophically and metaphysically? In this case, then maybe the modern sciences, irreplaceable as they are, do not get to the deepest issues about reality. Just as the soul of the university stems from the pursuit of a unified form of knowledge, so metaphysical realism provides the deepest ground for the unity of all forms of learning.

Third, although there are exceptions to the rule, it has to be said that analytic philosophers seem to have problems asking the big questions, such as “Why does human existence seem meaningful, or seems problematically to lack meaning when it ought to?” Why is almost no religious tradition taken seriously by modern analytic departments, generally speaking? Merely utilitarian theories about morality may be fashionable, but they are pretty profoundly counter-intuitive in the face of real human injustice and political evil. Without sufficient gravitas, a philosophical tradition will become unimportant in the end because it lacks human depth, even if it can create ornate charts of symbolic logic and quixotic imaginative scenarios about possible worlds.

Let us just presuppose, for the sake of argument, that my list of pros and cons, caricatural as it may be, is not entirely inaccurate. The brief question I would pose is the following: what does Thomism have to contribute to the future of analytic philosophy? This is not the question of whether non-religious philosophers pay any attention to Thomist thinkers. That is a strategic question. My question is a question of diagnosis and response. And here one might simply say the following: modern philosophy in general, and contemporary analytic philosophy in particular, have not been particularly successful at promoting a classical idea one finds in Aquinas that is of some importance. This is the idea that there are principles—not in the mind only, but first and foremost, in the things themselves. Reality has an intelligibility because it has a structure, and this structure can be studied and understood. Such principles include form and matter, substance and accidents, act and potency, essence and existence, the hylomorphic composition of the living body, the virtues and vices, the eleven passions, the twelve aspects of the voluntary act, and we could prolong the list. The point is this: Thomism as a tradition of thinking is not just a method of

doing philosophy. It does promote certain methods of dialectical argumentation, dialogical interest in new opinions, reflective use of sound logical argumentation, and so forth. More fundamentally, however, it has an intellectual content based on key claims about the structure of reality. This is what the principles of Thomism contend with. And this content is quite helpful, even potent, in thinking about the situation we find ourselves intellectually today.

Take our three previous examples of difficulties: the unity and diversity of kinds of learning, the relationship of science to philosophy, and the centrality to philosophy of inquiry into the big questions. Regarding the first, Aquinas distinguishes between the speculative and practical sciences. Among the former are the mathematical, the natural philosophical, and the metaphysical. Among the latter are the ethical and political versus the artistic, such as poetics or architecture. Many sciences are blends, involving the subordination or subalteration of various sciences to one another. The modern sciences employ *both* mathematics and technical methods of observation to unveil regular features of material causation in physical bodies at descending levels of scale. History employs *both* a mixture of probabilistic analysis of past events and philosophy about the human condition. The larger point, however, is that we can make a catalogue or map of the diverse forms of knowledge and show how they rightly interrelate and complement each other within a realistic epistemology. At the center is metaphysics, much as ultimate meaning claims about the nature of reality is at the center of philosophy and at the center of the university.

As concerns the question of the sciences, Thomism speaks of the key distinction of form and matter. The former distinction allows us to articulate a concept of substantial form. There are not only aggregates of things, but there are simples—substances, properly basic realities. And these have properties (“accidents,” in the Scholastic terminology). To be honest, it does not really matter at what level we admit this: the atomic, the chemical, the organic, or that of the ordinary medium-sized dry goods that we encounter and that we are. There is good reason to think we might want to talk about substantial wholes at each of these levels in non-reductionary ways. But the main point is this: reality is really, literally unthinkable without the distinction of form and matter, or of substantial whole and material part. Once we see this, not only can the natural sciences *not ever have the last word* about the meaning of reality ontologically, but also a whole lot of other notions can readily come into play and have an important role in helping us understand the nature of things: actuality and potentiality, substance

and accidents, final causality, goodness and qualities, and the ontology of beauty. Scientific realism about wholes and parts leads to metaphysical realism about the irreducibility of philosophy to the modern sciences and shows the folly of reductionist empiricism.

Finally, regarding the big questions and their unavoidability, I will give just one example, but a significant one: the real distinction that Aquinas posits between essence and existence. Etienne Gilson underemphasized the role of the philosophy of nature in Aquinas. But he did rightly sense that this distinction (between *esse* and *essentia*) was key to a modern approach to the empirical sciences in at least one way. If nothing we experience is the cause of its own existence, then it is inevitably the case that we can ask a dual question: what is the origin of the existences of things, indeed, of existence that all things participate in? And what kind of unique animal are we, as intellectual beings, who can ask the question of our radical metaphysical origins? I am suggesting, then, that paying attention to the “real distinction” does point us back to the fundamental question of the existence of God as the origin of being, and to the issue of the intellectual soul as a principle of reason which in its horizon of reflection transcends material phenomena. And yet, as Gilson noted, even if God is the transcendent giver of all that exists, the realities given being by him, in their vast and intricate web of mutually interdependent causality, are also each beings with a given internal content or essence and with various capacities and activities that they effectuate themselves, as true secondary causes, even to uphold in being and transmit substantial being to one another. The affirmation of a primary cause, God, does not obviate or obscure in any way the reality of authentic secondary causes with their respective integrity and scientific intelligibility. Why does this matter? Because, if we understand the point rightly, it means that asking the big questions—even religious ones—obliges us in no way to disrespect the more intra-mundane world of the sciences and the philosophy of ordinary experience and ontology in creatures. On the contrary, for Aquinas, the affirmation of God as Creator would oblige us to take these secondary causes especially seriously, as reflecting the structure of reality and, therefore, divine wisdom preceding all human understanding, and serving as the authentic measure of the latter.

My goal in making these generic comments has not been to suggest that analytic philosophy needs somehow to be saved by Thomistic philosophy. The point has been to propose something realistic and practicable. Within the contemporary terrain of contemporary analytic philosophy and the modern sciences, what should Thomist philoso-

phers seek to do? They should seek to promote understanding of the principles of Thomistic philosophy and to explain the depth of insight these principles afford in the face of competing accounts of reality that are currently on offer: act and potency, the transcendentals, the categories, the four causes, the agent intellect, and all the rest of it. Why should we not—because there is some other omni-competent influential form of thought out there usurping any place for completing claims? No. The hegemony of Kantianism is dead, as is the presumed competency of logical positivism, or the presumption of Humean notions of causality. Instead, the epistemological landscape is largely fragmented and divided. We should certainly have courage, then, because there is truly nothing with more cogency and depth in the contemporary philosophical market than Thomism. But why should we promote it—because of mere historical inertia, or community pride or ideological party positions? No, certainly not. We should do so for one reason only: because its principles are sound and their explanatory value is unique. In short, because central claims of Aquinas are true. This is the only reason to believe anything. And it is a reason that should give us the courage to stand above convention. For, although it was said by someone else in a very different context, the mission of those who serve the truth remains, in a certain respect, always the same: to liberate the mind for the truth. That is to say, “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). N V