

The Vindication of St. Thomas: Thomism and Contemporary Anglo-American Philosophy

(Dedicated to Ralph McInerny and James Ross - Requiescant in Pace)

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Abstract: *Fifty years after the overthrow of St. Thomas and Thomistic Scholasticism in Catholic intellectual life in general and in Catholic philosophy and theology in particular, we are now witnessing a revival of Aristotelianism and Thomism in a place where one would have least anticipated it, mainstream Anglo-American analytic philosophy. This phenomenon has been relatively well-documented in the case of moral theory, but is less well known in two areas that from a Thomistic standpoint are more fundamental than moral theory, viz., philosophy of nature and philosophical anthropology. In my presentation, after highlighting certain consequences of the overthrow of Thomism, I will discuss this revival, along with some cognate developments within recent Catholic theology, with an eye toward giving some direction to the new generation of Catholic philosophers and theologians.*

1. The Overthrow: Fifty Years Later

First of all, I want to thank the Dominicans of the province of the Most Holy Name of Jesus and, more specifically, those associated with the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology in Berkeley for inviting me to speak at this Dialogue between Philosophy and Theology. Indeed, while others are welcome to listen in, the intended audience for my presentation is precisely Catholic philosophers and theologians — and especially the younger ones, including graduate students.

I know what you're thinking: "Oh, no, not one of those dreary talks by an old guy imparting 'wisdom' to us supposedly benighted young people." Sorry, all I can say in my defense is that I hope it is not *too* dreary, and I hope you are not *too* benighted. The truth is that I am desperate to find a receptive audience, given that nowadays at Notre Dame there are only a handful of graduate students in either theology or (especially) philosophy who are interested in St. Thomas or the other great Scholastic thinkers. And therein lies a tale: the tale of the overthrow of St. Thomas and Thomistic Aristotelianism in Catholic higher education and, more generally, in Catholic intellectual life throughout the 1960's and into the early 1970's. I begin my presentation with this tale mainly in order to discuss its lasting consequences rather than to dwell on its causes. As for the latter, there is more than enough blame to go around on all sides, as is evident from Philip Gleason's detailed and even-handed re-telling of the history of Catholic higher education in the 1950's and 1960's.¹ By contrast, my main purpose in this paper is to talk about the past only in order to shed some light on the present and the short-term future.

So there I was in the mid-1960's, a student in a diocesan seminary filled to the brim with

¹Philip Gleason, *Contending With Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1995), esp. pp. 287-304.

idealistic aspiring clerics, studying philosophy and theology. In addition to various figures in the history of philosophy, we were reading the likes of Henri De Lubac, Karl Rahner, Bernard Lonergan, Edward Schillebeeckx, Yves Congar, and even the very early Joseph Ratzinger. Some of our teachers were just back from studying in Rome, where they had drunk deeply of so-called Transcendental Thomism — which, upon later scrutiny, I found to be in some significant ways an inversion of Thomism rather than a version of it. In any case, those were heady days. We who had hardly read a page of St. Thomas himself or of his most important commentators considered ourselves experts on the shortcomings of Thomism. When, years later, I read Ralph McInerney's vivid description, near the beginning of *Thomism in an Age of Renewal*,² of a mindless and baseless tirade by a young priest in a seminary common room against Thomism and prominent Thomists, I was embarrassed to recall that I myself had participated just as mindlessly and just as baselessly in many such conversations. (I had read my de Lubac, after all.)

And it wasn't merely us neophytes. Our elders, many of whom knew little of the actual documents of Vatican II but had nonetheless imbibed what they called "the spirit of Vatican II," decided that this spirit dictated the overthrow of Thomism and Scholasticism in general on every front: radical changes in undergraduate and graduate curricula at Catholic universities, colleges, and even seminaries; radical changes in faculty composition and interests at these same institutions; radical changes in the composition and interests of graduate student populations, etc. After decades of inhabiting a philosophical 'ghetto', as they termed it, we were finally to come of age and to join the 'real' philosophical world, even though, truth be told, we did not have any very clear vision of what that meant — outside of banishing the Thomists — or of how to separate the wheat from the chaff in mainstream academic philosophy.

The changes were, in retrospect, breathtaking. Let me give two examples from the institution I am most familiar with:

At Notre Dame, the standard four-course university requirement in Thomistic philosophy for undergraduates — including one course each in (a) philosophy of nature, (b) philosophical anthropology, (c) metaphysics, and (d) moral and political philosophy — devolved in the late 1960's into a two-course university requirement in philosophy with no prescribed content for either the introductory course or the second-level course.³ In addition, the so-called 'core curriculum' in the humanities outside of philosophy became little more than a distribution requirement with no university-mandated content. As a result, it is today a common occurrence for a student to graduate from Notre Dame with literally no decent exposure at all to the thought of Aristotle or Plato, not to mention St. Augustine or St. Thomas. More tellingly, only a small percentage of our graduates has ever encountered in any depth the sane Thomistic understanding of the relation between faith and reason or between faith and natural science. If, before the

²*Thomism in an Age of Renewal* (Doubleday, 1966).

³There is one exception as far as content is concerned. While chatting with a student on an airline flight in the early 1980's, Fr. Hesburgh learned to his dismay that as many as half of Notre Dame's undergraduates were using a course in formal logic (propositional calculus with a smidgen of first-order predicate logic) to satisfy the second university philosophy requirement. He demanded that the department no longer allow formal logic to count as fulfilling that requirement, but that it provide something more philosophically substantive instead.

overthrow, one of the accusations was that Notre Dame undergraduates were being indoctrinated with Thomism and Catholic philosophy, nowadays the typical Notre Dame graduate leaves campus without ever having heard that there is such a thing as Thomism or a Catholic philosophical tradition. And it is not just the undergraduates. In 2003, when the philosophy department was conducting a search for a Thomist, it turned out that some of my younger colleagues, cradle Catholics among them, had never even heard of a Thomist.

Again, the graduate program in philosophy, once predominately Thomistic, was by the late 1960's being touted as 'pluralistic' — which meant, in practice, that in the 45 years between 1968 and 2013, exactly four Thomistic-leaning philosophers were hired at Notre Dame — normally under the rubric *medieval philosophy* — and this despite the fact that the department doubled in size to forty faculty members during that same period. Only two of the four are left on the faculty now. What's more, as noted above, the number of graduate students working on St. Thomas or on major Scholastic figures has dwindled over the years. Something similar, though not quite as drastic, has occurred in the theology department.

Unfortunately, the overthrow ran much deeper even than this. Here are two of its more disturbing general consequences:

In his perceptive review of Fergus Kerr, OP, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians: From Chenu to Ratzinger* (Blackwell, 2006),⁴ R.R. Reno notes that the 20th century giants in Catholic theology are now barely intelligible to the new generations of Catholic theologians, in large measure because the younger people have not been provided with a solid grounding in the standard Scholastic philosophy and theology in which the great theologians had been trained, within which they had formulated their problematics, and against which they had in various ways reacted. In the absence of this background, younger Catholic theologians are in danger of being cut off not only from the 20th century giants but from the very tradition that they aspire (or *should* aspire) to serve and contribute to. Even those who (laudably) immerse themselves in the Fathers and Doctors of the Church may fail to understand that a large part of the task that St. Thomas had set for himself was precisely to provide the writings of the Fathers and Doctors with a sound metaphysical framework in light of which we can understand and learn from those writings — in much the same way that, from a Thomistic perspective, the findings of the natural sciences demand the sort of metaphysical context of interpretation and appropriation provided by a sound philosophy of nature.⁵ In addition, many of the Fathers, as well as the Church herself in council, drew heavily from the Gentile philosophers and cannot be properly understood by those who do not have the right sort of philosophical training.

⁴*First Things*, May 2007.

⁵I realize that much more needs to be said here. But those pre-conciliar theologians who complained that Scholastic manuals omitted the Fathers of the Church had a legitimate complaint in their demand for *ressourcement*. This is why the manuals and textbooks cannot claim to duplicate everything St. Thomas had in mind, and also why the preparation of theologians should include reading St. Thomas's own texts in addition to secondary material. But this point goes in both directions. The idea that the writings of the Fathers need no interpretive philosophical framework is just as misguided as the idea that St. Thomas can be fully understood without adverting to his relationship to the Fathers.

Perhaps more importantly, the theological creativity of the best and most lasting sort can be exercised only against the background of some such metaphysical framework — in the way, for instance, that Karol Wojtyła's theology of the body self-consciously presupposes but goes beyond standard Thomistic philosophical anthropology. This is clear from the example of almost all the most creative of the 'new' Catholic theologians of the 20th century. In this respect, I think in particular of Lonergan, Rahner, and one of my favorites who is not featured in Kerr's book, Romano Guardini.

The second point is that, as Gleason emphasized in his work on Catholic higher education, the rejection of Thomistic Scholasticism — and of the so-called 'Thomistic synthesis' along with it — was a major factor in the loss of vision that helped transform Catholic colleges and universities into what I have elsewhere called 'public schools in Catholic neighborhoods'.⁶ In short, when you combined this lack of an intellectual and moral compass with the aspiration to be great even as Harvard and Princeton and Berkeley are great, you could easily have anticipated what we have now, viz., institutions that claim to be "Catholic, *but also* intellectually excellent," where that very un-Thomistic "but also" tells you all you need to know about the lack of confidence Catholic university administrators have in their own distinctive intellectual traditions. This is no surprise, given that nowadays many of these administrators are themselves the product of the sort of deficient Catholic education described above.

When we apply this last point to the particular case of philosophy as a profession, we come to the specific topic that I want to concentrate on for the remainder of my paper. In particular, in the 1960's and 1970's it was felt that Thomistic philosophy was out of touch with, and could never be in touch with, the best of contemporary philosophy as practiced at the best secular universities. The so-called 'ghetto-ization' of Thomism was, to be sure, in some measure the fault of Thomists themselves, but it would be unfair to make this observation without noting that in the middle decades of the 20th century mainstream Anglo-American philosophy was dominated by logical positivism, pragmatism, and ordinary language philosophy, three of the most virulently anti-metaphysical movements in the history of philosophy.

Despite the fact that none of these movements is dominant today, their effects have lingered for a very long time. So until recently, a certain amount of decorum and propriety and, as it were, indirection has been necessary on the part of Thomists and their sympathizers when they put forward Thomistic theses, as has in fact happened across a wide number of areas in analytic philosophy over the last 25 or 30 years. Allow me a personal anecdote here. In 1997 a former student of mine, call him 'Geno', then a Rhodes Scholar doing a B.Phil. at Oxford, called me in desperation one afternoon. He had come across a passage in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that had him completely baffled three days before he was scheduled to make a presentation on it to his tutor. My advice to him was to sneak into a library, furtively glance at a copy of St. Thomas's commentary on that part of the *Ethics* and see if it might be of some help. He was, of course, not to mention St. Thomas to his tutor — or to anyone else, for that matter. Well, to make a long story short, a week later I received another call from a now ebullient Geno. When he had laid out

⁶Introduction, pp. xiii-xxxi in *What Happened to Notre Dame?* by Charles E. Rice (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2009). It should be added that many of the Catholic 'neighborhoods' are themselves highly dysfunctional.

St. Thomas's interpretation of the problematic passage (without, of course, mentioning St. Thomas by name), the tutor stroked his chin, volunteered that he had never thought of the relevant text in that way, and pronounced the interpretation "interesting, perhaps even brilliant." The moral of the story is that there was even at that time an openness to St. Thomas among some of the most hardened secular philosophers; you just had to be subtle about it, and very patient.

Well, patience may still be in order, but, as I will indicate below, a lot less subtlety is required these days. For we seem finally to have reached a point in the narrative of English-speaking philosophy at which there is a new and increasingly explicit openness to Aristotelian-Thomistic scholasticism. In other words, the stone that Catholic higher education rejected in the 1960's and 1970's in order to become 'relevant' is itself becoming the cornerstone of a new movement within mainstream philosophy some fifty years later.

To mark this delicious irony, which gets even more savory toward the end of my paper, I have entitled the last two sections 'God has a sense of humor: Part 1' and 'God has a sense of humor: Part 2'. Part 1 deals with systematic matters, while Part 2 singles out four recent books, two by younger Catholic philosophers and two by younger Catholic theologians, that exhibit what the short-term future of Thomism will look like at its best within Catholic thought and within the wider philosophical and theological culture.

2. God has a sense of humor: Part 1

In 1990 James Ross published one of his typical papers, both zany and perspicacious, entitled "The Fate of the Analysts: Aristotle's Revenge."⁷ The paper contains a powerful argument for the claim that the advance of natural science in the 20th century has exposed as woefully inadequate the substitutes for an Aristotelian philosophy of nature and philosophical anthropology that were invented by 17th and 18th century philosophers, the champions of the so-called 'new science' and of the so-called 'new way of ideas'. These new ways had technological advancement more than integrated theoretical truth as their main goal, and their immediate technological success served to avert the glance of most philosophers from their grave theoretical deficiencies.⁸ Since the various strands of Anglo-American analytic philosophy are embedded within the main philosophical problematics generated by the 17th century overthrow of Aristotelianism, the result, according to Ross, is that despite the brilliance of many of its practitioners and the number of genuinely important arguments and insights it has generated, Anglo-American analytic philosophy has failed as a whole. Indeed, it has failed spectacularly, since one main drift of recent analytic metaphysics and epistemology has been toward the very

⁷*Proceedings of American Catholic Philosophical Association* 64 (1990), pp. 51-74. For a careful and extended argument in support of Ross' idea that there is "software everywhere" in the natural world and that this points to the conclusion that Aristotelian forms and teleology are the best explanation for it, see Edward Feser, "From Aristotle to John Searle and Back Again: Formal Causes, Teleology, and Computation in Nature" (forthcoming).

⁸Even one who thinks that Malebranche, Berkeley, and Leibniz are exceptions here must admit that their proposed cures were almost as bad as the disease. At the very least, I know of no mainstream philosopher who today espouses any of their alternative philosophies of nature.

sort of idealism that the original founders of analytic philosophy were rebelling against at the beginning of the 20th century. And this drift toward idealism has been generated in part by the dissonance between ordinary and (now, according to Ross) scientific images of the world, on the one hand, and the defective conceptions of matter and mind that emerged from the 17th century and still dominate analytic philosophy. In other words, while the mainstream view is that there is a deep conflict between our ordinary ‘human’ image of the world and the scientific image of the world, Ross argues to the contrary that there seems to be a conflict here only if one is under the spell of an inadequate philosophy of nature and thus of a distorted understanding of matter and mind.

Ross’ paper, which predictably fell on deaf ears in 1990, was, I believe, published about 25 years too early — though this is not to underplay the resolve it gave Thomists and other Aristotelians to persevere in the conviction that many of the main problematics in analytic metaphysics, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of science had been skewed in such a way as to rule out promising Aristotelian positions *a priori*.

A similar sort of critique had already been initiated in moral theory, with the publication in 1981 of Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*.⁹ MacIntyre’s trenchant criticism of the problematic itself of analytic moral philosophy had drawn upon and supplied a dazzling historical narrative for Elizabeth Anscombe’s seminal article “Modern Moral Philosophy.”¹⁰ MacIntyre, like Anscombe before him, urged philosophers to escape from prevailing forms of emotivism, consequentialism, and deontology by renewing their interest in classical virtue theory, especially as expounded by Aristotle. And this indeed happened, though in the sort of half-hearted way that has generally characterized the slow but steady Aristotelian revival of the last 25 years. In the first edition of *After Virtue* even MacIntyre himself eschewed what he dismissively called “Aristotle’s metaphysical biology” as a groundwork for virtue theory. A similar disdain for metaphysics and for the connection between philosophical anthropology and moral theory has characterized the so-called ‘New Natural Law’ movement. Others have attempted to fashion ‘virtue theories’ as an alternative to the dominant forms of consequentialism and deontology, but have remained reluctant to tie their theories to any thick and substantive account of the good for beings that are both animals and rational. Here the problem lies as much in philosophical anthropology as in moral theory itself.

MacIntyre later retracted his rejection of “metaphysical biology” as he became more sensitized, mainly at the urging of Thomists, to the deep connections between our biological nature as dependent rational animals and the foundations in that nature of normative standards for action, culture, and social organization. But others attracted to virtue theory have persisted in the post-Humean separation of metaphysics from moral theory.

Similar, but lesser known, stories of reluctant and piecemeal acceptance of Aristotelian theses can be told in areas that I will characterize broadly, in Aristotelian terms, as philosophy of

⁹Notre Dame, 1981, 2nd edition 1984, 3rd edition 2007.

¹⁰ *Philosophy* 33 (1958), pp. 1-19.

nature and philosophical anthropology. I can only scratch the philosophical surface here, but I hope to say enough to give you a general sense of the state of things.

a. *Philosophy of nature*

The first set of examples I want to talk about is, from an Aristotelian perspective, broadly included under the rubric *philosophy of nature*. More specifically, I will be highlighting issues such as causality, agency, and scientific laws of nature.

In analytic ‘action theory’, some had made the concession along the way that rational beings are real agents (*read*: genuine Aristotelian efficient causes) even if agency cannot be attributed to anything else in the natural world. After all, according to the standard way of thinking, Aristotle’s claim that there is genuine power and agency in all of nature had simply been an anthropomorphic projection of human agency onto unthinking nature, perhaps encouraged by ordinary ways of talking, and so this claim had been rightly discarded when the world was, as they say, ‘disenchanted’ by 17th century thinkers. Still, according to this line of thought, Aristotle’s starting point was sound; there are reasons for thinking that rational beings are genuine agents. So the conclusion was drawn by some that there are two fundamentally different types of causality, Aristotelian ‘agent causality’, where a rational agent causes an event, and Humean ‘event causality’, where events are causes of other events.

Now as many have come to understand, this is a messy and untenable position. From an Aristotelian perspective, human agency is merely a higher-order manifestation of the ubiquitous natural agency that is in fact epistemically prior to — or, at the very least, epistemically simultaneous with — human agency in our experience. From a Humean perspective, on the other hand, there is a similar epistemic symmetry; the very same considerations that lead one to deny (or to adopt agnosticism with respect to) agency in unthinking nature should likewise lead one to deny peculiarly human agency. The moral of the story, once again, is that a fragmentary and half-hearted Aristotelianism is not only no Aristotelianism at all, but also a philosophically unsatisfactory compromise.

Something curious was occurring simultaneously in the parallel literature about causality that was being generated by analytic metaphysicians. Here the problematic of characterizing causality was set up in such a way that the only two possible solutions stemmed from two different characterizations of causality found in the work of — who else? — David Hume, viz., the so-called regularity theory of causality and the so-called counterfactual theory of causality; each was then associated with its own take on what scientific laws of nature are. By the time the battle was over, neither account emerged victorious; even the most sophisticated versions of the two theories were subject to debilitating counterexamples.¹¹ Needless to say, Hume himself had, almost unknowingly, inherited both ways of ‘defining’ causality from Scholastic thinkers, who had thought of regularity and counterfactual dependence as defeasible *signs* of genuine efficient

¹¹For more on this debate from an Aristotelian perspective, see part 4 of my “[Suarez on Metaphysical Inquiry, Efficient Causality, and Divine Action](#),” in Francisco Suarez, *On Creation, Conservation, and Concurrence: Metaphysical Disputations 20-22*, translation, notes, and introduction by Alfred J. Freddoso (St. Augustine's Press, 2002)

causality, but not as definitive of it.

But what of genuine efficient causality itself? Was it anywhere to be seen in the philosophical literature? Well, yes it was, but this occurred in the almost wholly independent literature on causality that was being generated by analytic philosophers of science. Here, in accord with Ross's fundamental insight, the force of actual scientific practice and discourse was being felt, so that a few philosophers of science (Rom Harré and Edward Madden in their book *Causal Powers* and Nancy Cartwright in *How the Laws of Physics Lie* and later in *Nature's Capacities and Their Measurements*) had begun to urge that the problems besetting philosophers about causality and about the character and modality of scientific laws of nature could best be solved by attributing to natural entities causal powers and tendencies and resultant causal actions.¹² The suggestion was then made that scientific laws of nature be thought of as reflecting the inherent causal powers and tendencies of natural agents.¹³ All of these positions are, of course, standard fare within Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy of nature. Again, the progress was fragmentary and piecemeal, but its direction was unmistakable.

b. *Philosophical Anthropology*

Perhaps the best example of all comes from contemporary philosophy of mind, or what I prefer to call 'philosophical anthropology' because of its importance for our own self-understanding. In this section I will refer more explicitly to the 'Thomistic' account of the human being in order to bypass difficulties about the interpretation of Aristotle's *De Anima*. To my mind, it is clear that Aristotle should have meant what St. Thomas took him to mean, and that St. Thomas's own philosophical anthropology is precisely what is needed to heal, or at least ameliorate, the pathological condition of contemporary analytic philosophy of mind.¹⁴

According to the Thomistic view, the human intellectual soul is the subsistent and immaterial form of the human organism, i.e., the principle by which a certain matter is constituted as a particular sort of animal organism. Its peculiarly intellectual operations do not directly involve sentient operations, but they nonetheless depend on sentient operations for their content and causal origins. So on this view human beings are unified animal organisms, but also distinctive in the animal kingdom because of their intellectual powers and operations; and it is

¹²*Causal Powers: Theory of Natural Necessity* (Blackwell, 1975); *How the Laws of Physics Lie* (Oxford, 1983); *Nature's Capacities and Their Measurements* (Oxford, 1994).

¹³Notice, by the way, that the very notion of scientific 'laws' of nature, where hardly any of the philosophers involved in the contemporary discussion believe in a lawgiver for these laws, is itself a bit anomalous. This is not unlike Anscombe's pointing to a similar anomaly with the use of terms like 'moral law' and 'moral obligation' and 'moral prohibition' by philosophers who no longer believe in a divine lawgiver.

¹⁴Edward Feser has written perhaps the most illuminating overview of contemporary analytic philosophy of mind, *Philosophy of Mind (A Beginner's Guide)* (Oneworld Publications, 2006). Feser ends this book with an argument for the Thomistic position, which he calls 'hylomorphic dualism'. I do not approve of the use of the term 'dualism' for St. Thomas's position, primarily because he himself articulated his own position mainly in opposition to a version of Platonic dualism and also because the use of the term 'dualism' signals, to my mind, too easy an accommodation to the skewed contemporary problematic in analytic philosophy of mind. However, this is a disagreement about words (though they can be important, too) and not a disagreement about the realities themselves.

precisely the intellectual powers and operations that entail the subsistence and immateriality of the form that makes these corporeal organisms to be what they are.

By contrast, sentience by itself does not entail either the subsistence or immateriality of the forms of lower animals. So on this view sentient cognition and feeling do not by themselves require an immaterial subject. It is just an amazing fact about the world that certain corporeal substances that are potentially decomposable without material remainder into their elemental constituents are nonetheless conscious beings capable of sensing and remembering and imagining and feeling. These sentient operations have as their matter (or material cause) certain physiological operations and as their form (or formal cause) cognitive and appetitive movements directed toward objects of sensation or of imagination or of love or of fear, etc.

All of this makes perfectly good sense and comports well with our ordinary ways of thinking about ourselves and about other animals, but it obviously entails a conception of the potentialities of matter that does not fit the 17th century model. To make a long story short, the contemporary problematic in analytic philosophy of mind is still haunted by something resembling Descartes's reductionist portrait of the corporeal world: mindless and wholly passive elemental entities subject to externally imposed laws of change and movement, entering incidentally into macro-configurations that have no non-quantifiable characteristics and no higher-level powers, tendencies, or activities peculiar to them as such. In other words, there is nothing in the corporeal world like Aristotle's higher-level natures or the forms that constitute them. As Ross points out, this does not seem to be the sort of corporeal world that present-day natural science is actually delivering up to us, but, be that as it may, it is the sort of corporeal world that largely dominates the thinking of current mainstream philosophers of mind.

As is well known, Descartes posited a separate non-corporeal receptacle, viz., the human soul, for the sensings and imaginings and rememberings and feelings (and, oh yes, abstract thinking and reasoning) that had thus been excluded from the corporeal world. Later generations of philosophers have, of course, by and large abandoned the soul as an immaterial substance ontologically independent of the body it is associated with, where that body is itself an incidental macro-configuration of matter. And so these philosophers are saddled with the problem of explaining how the 'incidental configurations of matter' popularly known as animals and human beings can have inner cognitive and appetitive lives. Some materialists, following Descartes himself, have simply denied to the corporeal world altogether the reality of cognition and appetite as we conceive of them in ordinary life; these are the so-called 'eliminative materialists', who claim that our normal ways of thinking about ourselves and our inner lives constitute a mistaken proto-scientific theory that needs to be replaced by something scientifically more respectable. (For homework you can try to imagine what Shakespeare or the Bible or a love song would sound like in the language of perfected neurophysiology.) Other materialists have tried somehow to fit sentient and intellectual cognition and appetite into what is philosophically equivalent to the corporeal world bequeathed to them by Descartes. On the surface — and below the surface, too — this seems like an impossible task.

It is curious, from a Thomistic perspective, that the contemporary mainstream debate between materialists and dualists has centered almost entirely around sentient cognition and

appetition, i.e., around sensings and feelings, and not around higher intellectual powers and operations.¹⁵ As hinted above, no Thomist would ever try to fashion an argument for the subsistence or immateriality of the human soul from sentience alone, and yet in contemporary philosophy of mind an argument for the irreducibility of sentient cognitions and feelings, i.e., of so-called *qualia*, to the physiological is taken to be an argument for some form of dualism.

More tellingly, both sides in the contemporary dispute seem to have a problem with non-human animals. In my classes I train my students to think “No animal pain!” whenever they hear the name ‘Descartes’, in order to impress upon them the sheer implausibility of the Cartesian philosophy of nature. But it is just as ludicrous from a Thomistic perspective to believe, as all materialists except perhaps for the crassest ‘identity theorists’ do, that *qualia* as such lie beyond the reach of scientific explanation properly understood and that this is what makes them so problematic in the first place. As Ross remarks:

“[I want] to emphasize Aristotle’s and Aquinas’ conviction that [animals] *do* have feeling and cognition that it is the business of science to explain. Returning to the forms requires returning to notions of cognition that were trashed with the forms ... The proper ambit of ‘epistemology naturalized’ is the whole of the animal kingdom. That creates a demand on science: ‘Never mind man and thought, for now; deliver your promises with the worms’.”¹⁶

Here, too, there is a halfway house with Aristotelian-Thomistic overtones, viz., so-called “property dualism,” a position according to which, while sentient cognition and affection have no immaterial subject, they do involve psychological properties which are not identical with or reducible to physiological properties, but which are nonetheless correlated with them ‘in the right way’ — whatever that right way turns out to be. So one finds a standard property dualist claiming that sensings and feelings are not identical with or in any way reducible to the physiological processes that properly fall under the purview of the natural sciences, but that they nonetheless *supervene upon* such processes. The promise, almost surely misguided given the terms of the problem, is that somehow a way will be found to integrate the psychological and the physiological so conceived into a coherent *causal* picture.¹⁷

If we tried to force Thomism into the current problematic in philosophy of mind, then on the surface it might seem that the Thomistic account of non-human animals is a version of property dualism. However, this appearance is misleading. For what St. Thomas says about

¹⁵This despite some very powerful arguments by one of the participants in our conference, John Searle, for the claim that intellectual understanding cannot be — at least, cannot *easily* be — reduced to computational operations. See Feser, *Philosophy of Mind*, pp. 155-170 for a detailed discussion of Searle’s arguments and for references.

¹⁶“The Fate of the Analysts: Aristotle’s Revenge,” pp. 66-67.

¹⁷The best exposition and defense of this position occurs in David Chalmer’s *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (Oxford, 1997). Interestingly, property dualists seem to think that it is only sentience, and not intellection, that undermines straightforward materialism. For a sympathetic but tough-minded discussion of property dualism, see Feser, *Philosophy of Mind*, esp. pp. 108-114. In particular, Feser argues that in the end there is no integrated causal picture, but that instead property-dualism ends up treating psychological properties as epiphenomenal.

sentience in non-human animals is already embedded within a full-blown philosophy of nature that (a) includes a well-ordered general account of the powers peculiar to the form of sentient beings and is thus already capable of accommodating new findings about the physiology involved in sensing and feeling, and that (b) is at home with talk of causal connections between the psychological and the physiological, where by ‘causal connections’ the Thomist means a full array of formal, material, efficient, and final causes. Why settle for a dubious substitute when you can have the real thing?

So the story is this: In general, neither contemporary materialists nor contemporary dualists are able to fashion an acceptable philosophical anthropology that preserves our understanding of ourselves as both unified animals and very special animals, where the arguments for our distinctiveness turn on our higher, i.e., intellective, cognitive and appetitive abilities.¹⁸ And, once again, there are signs of an openness to new ways of thinking that are not hemmed in by a Cartesian philosophy of nature. This is, in part, the message of Thomas Nagel’s recent controversial book, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False*.¹⁹ Nagel does not espouse any version of Aristotelianism, but he is insistent that philosophers must begin to think outside the Cartesian box and, more specifically, outside the conceptions of matter and mind that Descartes has bequeathed to them.

I am not, to be sure, suggesting that there is anything like a groundswell of rebellion against the contemporary problematic. In fact, challenging that problematic can take some courage in the current philosophical environment, especially if you’re a card-carrying member of the philosophical establishment — as witness the many hysterical (in both senses) reactions to Nagel’s book. Still, the very fact that the book has garnered so much attention is itself an indication of a movement in the right direction.

What’s more, this right direction no longer seems to require indirection. In the past few years we have seen a call by younger philosophers and theologians to recover a confident Thomism, not watered down by the pusillanimous worry that there might be no sympathy for Thomistic positions among secular thinkers, or even among other Catholic thinkers. To this phenomenon I now turn.

3. *God has a sense of humor: Part 2*

St. Luke tells us that in reprimanding the crowds who flocked to him as a prophet, John the Baptist uttered these memorable words: “Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham” (Luke 3:8). Even given the philosophical and theological devastation to Catholic higher education wrought in large measure by the overthrow of Thomism, a trickle of Thomists has

¹⁸The most interesting recent argument for the immateriality of intellective cognition is found in James Ross, “Immaterial Aspects of Thought,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 89 (1992), pp. 136-150. Edward Feser sharpens this argument and defends it in “Kripke, Ross, and the Immaterial Aspects of Thought,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 87 (2013), pp. 1-32.

¹⁹Oxford, 2012.

continued to emerge in the intervening years. However, perhaps in order to make a point, God has of late been raising up exceptional Thomists from the very stones, as it were.

I will briefly mention four recent books, two by younger theologians and two by younger philosophers, which exhibit Thomism at its intellectual best in the world of contemporary philosophy and theology. It is worth noting that none of the authors is in possession of either a faculty position at or so much as a degree from any of the establishment Catholic universities that jettisoned Thomism in the 1960's and 1970's. The two philosophers are former atheists; one of the theologians is a convert from Judaism and the other, my commentator today, is a convert from what we might call Jewish Presbyterianism with a bit of post-modern agnosticism thrown in for good measure.

I will begin with the philosophers. As I have already noted, Aristotelian and Thomistic incursions into contemporary mainstream metaphysics, philosophy of mind, and moral theory have tended to be piecemeal and fragmentary, and this very spottiness itself sometimes distorts both the intentions and the teachings of St. Thomas and other Scholastic authors. The two books I am about to mention reject this piecemeal approach and, in open dialogue with mainstream analytic philosophers, argue unabashedly and very effectively for a full-scale and systematic adoption of Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics as a cure for what ails contemporary analytic metaphysics and philosophy of mind.

The first book is David Oderberg's [*Real Essentialism*](#),²⁰ which contains a brilliant and extended defense of undiluted Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics, along with a critique of a wide array of alternative positions on various metaphysical issues proposed in the current literature in analytic metaphysics. In particular, Oderberg discusses in painstaking detail essentialism itself, the nature and structure of material substance, accidental being, identity, definition and scientific taxonomy, and the nature of the human being and of human personhood. I especially recommend the chapter on the interface between biological species and metaphysical species, where Oderberg puts to rest decisively the idea that Aristotelian essentialism and taxonomical theory are dead within contemporary scientific practice.²¹

Next I turn to Edward Feser's [*Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*](#),²² hot off the press and currently a philosophical bestseller on Amazon.com. (I kid you not. The last time I checked, it had Amazon numbers almost unheard of for books in philosophy and was second on the metaphysics textbook list only to Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*!) Feser covers some of same ground as Oderberg, but spends more time on causality from a Thomistic perspective. Another interesting difference between the two books is this: In addition to the contemporary analytic literature on metaphysics, Feser engages and draws upon the very same 20th century Thomistic textbooks that the repudiators of Thomism in the 1960's considered an

²⁰Routledge, 2008.

²¹I should note in passing that Oderberg has also done, and continues to do, stellar work in moral theory. See, e.g., [*Moral Theory: A Non-Consequentialist Approach*](#) (Wiley-Blackwell, 2000).

²²Editiones Scholasticae, 2014.

embarrassment. For me it is quite exhilarating to see the likes of Henry Koren, George Klubertanz, Charles Hart, and (of course) Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange drawn into dialogue with analytic philosophers such as Anthony Kenny, David Armstrong, and David Lewis. This book is just the latest of Feser's accomplishments, which include several other books and many articles; I especially recommend his stellar work on Thomistic arguments for the existence of God. When you throw in [his excellent blog](#), Feser has done as much as anyone in the past ten years to promote and defend Thomism within mainstream philosophical circles.

When Averroes penned his reply to al-Ghazali's *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, he entitled it *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*. In view of the repudiation of Thomism by Catholic institutions of higher learning, we might entitle the project now being engaged in by Oderberg and Feser *The Repudiation of the Repudiation*. In the past, especially in conversations with Evangelical philosophers of religion, I have often heard the excuse that while they would like to learn more about Thomism, the time investment would be too great, given teaching demands and the pressure to publish. First, they would have to become familiar with the texts themselves, and then they would have to figure out how Thomism might interact with contemporary analytic philosophy. Well, there is no excuse any longer. Just read these two books carefully a couple of times each, and you will be well on your way. I would extend the same invitation to systematic theologians as well.

The third book I want to mention is [*Wisdom in the Face of Modernity: A Study in Thomistic Natural Theology*](#), by Thomas Joseph White, OP.²³ This is a very ambitious book in which the author attempts to clarify just what the project of Thomistic natural theology is and how that project is immune to the objections of Kant and Heidegger against so-called 'onto-theology'. As I understand Fr. White's project, it is meant to be a sort of introduction to St. Thomas's *Summa Contra Gentiles* for anyone under the sway of those objections. Fr. White also spends time rescuing St. Thomas from what he takes to be some subtle but important deviations from his thought by Jacques Maritain, Etienne Gilson, and Karl Rahner. Whereas Oderberg and Feser are mainly concerned with presenting Thomism as a viable alternative to certain positions in analytic philosophy, Fr. White's argument engages strands of so-called continental philosophy. In any case, the results are similar: a full-scale, unembarrassed, and effective argument for the superiority of Thomistic thought on a particular topic over against the contemporary alternatives.

The last book I want to mention is different from the others in that it is not an attempt to defend Thomism in dialogue with contemporary thinkers. However, it does illustrate the ability of Thomistic scholasticism to illuminate an important and controversial, but convoluted, theological discussion. Lawrence Feingold's [*The Natural Desire to See God According to St. Thomas and His Interpreters*](#)²⁴ brings a wealth of historical depth and, especially, analytical acumen to bear upon one of the most heated intellectual debates of mid-20th century Catholic theology, viz., the debate over Henri de Lubac's cluster of positions on nature and grace. Do not

²³Catholic University of America, 2009. I myself have [commented on the book here](#). It was Alasdair MacIntyre who first drew my attention to this book.

²⁴Catholic University of America, 2004.

get me wrong here. I sympathize with de Lubac's motivations and with certain key elements of his approach to the relation between nature and grace; as proof of this, I cite the fact that I have sometimes been called an 'Augustinian' by Thomist friends — and I do not think they meant it as a compliment. Still, I have always felt that de Lubac's articulation of his position contained some unfair criticisms of his scholastic opponents, some misinterpretations of St. Thomas, and, in general, a goodly amount of conceptual sloppiness. Feingold has straightened all of this out in what I take to be a magisterial work that all future discussions of nature and grace within Catholic theology will have to come to terms with. Not many books can claim that status. Concomitantly and not coincidentally, the book sets a standard for clarity and precision which should be mandatory for any future theological discussions of nature and grace. I know from experience that there are many delicate questions here that require care and subtlety. It is impossible to plumb the depths without clarity and precision.

These four books, then, serve as models of what an intellectually vibrant and 'relevant' Thomism will look like within the academic disciplines of philosophy and theology. I like to describe myself as pessimistic by temperament but optimistic by conviction. To see these books emerge in the years leading up to my own retirement makes me brim with the hope-filled conviction that the short-term future of Thomistic philosophy and theology is very bright indeed.

4. Conclusion: Acceptance or Grudging Respect?

As I said above, it was not my intent to engage in now useless recriminations about the 20th-century overthrow of Thomism in Catholic higher education and intellectual life. However, I have noted some of the intellectual desolation that has resulted, especially for the last several generations of Catholic college students. There are many fervent and smart young Catholics out there who are not interested in re-fighting the old battles of pre- and post-conciliar Catholicism. More than anything else, these young people want and need light to illumine their way in a very difficult world. Pope after pope has advised us to go to St. Thomas for this light. Perhaps it is time that we started once again to pay attention to them. The fact is that, love him or hate him, St. Thomas provides contemporary Catholic philosophers and theologians, even those who choose in the end to deviate from him in one way or another, with the philosophically most plausible starting points in philosophy of nature, natural theology, metaphysics, moral theory, and philosophical anthropology, along with the deepest and most thoroughly worked out account of the relation between faith and reason.

If it is fear of not being respected in the secular philosophical world that is holding us back, then, as I have indicated, this fear is ungrounded. In any case, there is not now — and never has been — any reason at all for Catholics to be in doubt about the sterling intellectual credentials of our own philosophical and theological traditions. We may not be able to get general acceptance of our positions within secular philosophical circles, but we can expect at least grudging respect if we live up to the high intellectual standards that we have inherited. (Of course, it's possible for someone both to respect you and to hate you at the same time, but as I recall from the Gospels, that comes with the territory.)

Pope Francis wants the Church to serve as a field hospital on the battleground of modern life. Well, that field hospital has an intellectual wing among others, and there are many spiritual works of mercy that need tending to by Catholic philosophers and theologians. Thomism has much to offer on this score — or so, at least, I have argued.

