

# *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy in a Postmodern World*

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All these people [“modernists”] have simply ceased to believe in Truth, and believe only in verisimilitudes pinned to *some* truths. . . . One has to be quite naïve to enlist in the service of such a philosophy if one has Christian faith (which is nothing without the Word—infinately independent of human subjectivity—of a revealing God who is infinitely independent of our mind). This is especially so if one belongs to the Catholic religion, which of all the religions . . . is most steadfast in recognizing and affirming the reality—irreducibly, splendidly, generously *in itself*—of the beings whom the Creator has made and the transcendence of this Other, who is the Truth in person and being itself subsisting by itself.<sup>1</sup>

## FAITH, REASON, AND POSTMODERNISM

In his recent encyclical letter, *Fides et Ratio*, Pope John Paul II urges philosophy to recover its authentic vocation as responsible for “forming thought and culture” through the vigorous pursuit of truth.<sup>2</sup> Two striking features of this document are its optimism about philosophy’s ability to answer fundamental questions and its overriding concern with the value of reason and truth.<sup>3</sup> This latter theme might well seem naïvely out of step with contemporary culture, in which the supremacy and autonomy of reason have

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne: An Old Layman Questions Himself about the Present Time*, trans. Michael Cuddihy and Elizabeth Hughes (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), pp. 7–9.

<sup>2</sup> *Fides et Ratio*, intro., no. 5. Hereafter cited as *FR*.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., *FR*, intro., no. 6, “I feel impelled to undertake this task above all because of the Second Vatican Council’s insistence that the Bishops are ‘witnesses of divine and Catholic truth’ . . . In the present encyclical letter, I wish to . . . [concentrate] on the theme of *truth* itself and on its *foundation* in relation to *faith*.”

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been called into question.<sup>4</sup> Quite to the contrary, however, John Paul II is acutely aware of the so-called “postmodern” developments in culture, which tend as he says toward a “lack of confidence in the truth.”<sup>5</sup> *Fides et Ratio* might well be termed the Pope’s encyclical on the postmodern temperament.<sup>6</sup> As vital and contemporary as this document is, it repeats a theme made popular by certain Thomists long before the term “postmodern” was fashionable.

As the theme of his letter suggests, the Pope sees a solution to philosophy’s discontent in the revitalization of a dynamic interrelationship between reason and faith. Echoing a thought expressed by many observers of modernity, including such unlikely intellectual compatriots as Étienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain on the one hand, and Richard Rorty on the other, he argues that modern philosophy in the wake of the Cartesian project turned increasingly inwards towards immanence and away from transcendence, especially transcendent truth.<sup>7</sup> This inward turn has wrought profound metaphysical and epistemological consequences. Metaphysically, philosophy lost its sapiential dimension, the ability to reach beyond the immediate focus upon reality as constrained to our experience of empirical phenomena.<sup>8</sup> Epistemologically, increased skepticism concerning reason’s ability to know the truth about our world has arisen.<sup>9</sup>

For the Pope, on the other hand, faith provides access to truths that en-

<sup>4</sup> See John Caputo, “Commentary on Ken Schmitz: ‘Postmodernism and the Catholic Tradition,’” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (Spring 1999), p. 254, “When I first read what Heidegger said about ‘being-in-the-world’ and how the question of whether there is a world makes no sense for beings whose Being is being-in-the-world, that struck a chord that resonated deeply with the ‘realism’ of my Catholic philosophical upbringing. We were all realists, afraid it seemed that someone was going to steal the world from us . . . I am sure the neoscholastic obsessiveness with ‘realism,’ with the epistemic defense of realism, is linked very closely to the Vatican defense of infallibility, both of which are distinctly 19<sup>th</sup> century events that reflect a lot of Cartesian, and very modern, anxiety.”

<sup>5</sup> *FR*, intro., no. 5.

<sup>6</sup> See *FR*, chap. 7, no. 91.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, “Modern philosophy clearly has the great merit of focusing attention upon man. . . . Yet the positive results achieved must not obscure the fact that reason, in its one-sided concern to investigate human subjectivity, seems to have forgotten that men and women are always called to direct their steps towards a truth which transcends them.” See also chap. 7, no. 81, “[T]he human spirit is often invaded by a kind of ambiguous thinking which leads it to an ever-deepening introversion, locked within the confines of its own immanence without reference of any kind to the transcendent.” John Paul II refrains from mentioning Descartes by name, but his brief presentation of the history of philosophy makes his view fairly clear. See chap. 4, nos. 45–46.

<sup>8</sup> See *FR*, chap. 7, no. 83.

<sup>9</sup> See *FR*, intro., no. 5 and chap. 4, no. 45.

hance the limited capacity of reason to establish truth demonstratively.<sup>10</sup> Thus, faith can enhance reason's self-confidence. But, more significantly, faith calls us to be open to self-transcendence. The modern habit of mind tended to eschew this as an appropriate philosophical starting point.<sup>11</sup> The postmodern habit of mind is hardly so unified. Postmodernists share a profound suspicion of modern philosophy's turn toward the self, but they do tend to accept the turn toward immanence in place of transcendence.<sup>12</sup> Some more secular postmodernists, such as Richard Rorty, view interest in the transcendent as the chief vice of their modern predecessors.<sup>13</sup> Catholic postmodernists may well recognize transcendence, but they tend toward a focus upon its unknowability.<sup>14</sup>

One particular epistemic shortcoming of the modern position, which relates especially to reason's interconnection with faith, is the failure to acknowledge the social dimension of knowledge. As John Paul II emphasizes, human persons find themselves in traditions of enquiry where "personal verification" must be complemented by "the truth of the person."<sup>15</sup> While the noetic quality of testimony may be less intrinsically perfect than personal verification, its fecundity and vital importance for human knowing are indisputable.<sup>16</sup> As Linda Zagzebski has cogently argued, modern epistemology tends to be excessively individualistic in its conceptions of knowledge and justification.<sup>17</sup> The upshot of this modern turn in the postmodern period is the rise of anti-realism and conceptual relativism. As John Paul II stresses, "legitimate plurality" has given way to "undifferentiated pluralism" and "widespread distrust of the human being's great capacity for knowledge."<sup>18</sup> The so-

<sup>10</sup> Maritain offers a complementary account of the relation between reason and faith in the *The Peasant of the Garonne*, pp. 142–43.

<sup>11</sup> See Descartes's letter of dedication which precedes his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, ed. Donald A. Cress, (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett, 1993), pp. 1ff.

<sup>12</sup> See Lawrence E. Cahoon, *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), pp. 15–16.

<sup>13</sup> See Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 1 (1999) pp. 7–20.

<sup>14</sup> See John Caputo, "Commentary on Ken Schmitz," pp. 255ff.

<sup>15</sup> See *FR*, chap. 3, nos. 31–32.

<sup>16</sup> See *FR*, chap. 3, no. 32.

<sup>17</sup> Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 11 *et passim*. See also Linda Zagzebski, "Religious Knowledge and the Virtues of the Mind," in *Rational Faith: Catholic Responses to Reformed Epistemology*, ed. Linda Zagzebski (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), pp. 199–225.

<sup>18</sup> *FR*, intro., no. 5.

lution according to the Pope, which Maritain and Gilson recognized so long ago, is to recover moderate realism by taking a more sensible epistemological course. We must recognize our nature as truth-seekers and interdependent beings with a capacity to realize that goal.<sup>19</sup> The truths acquired by faith provide an important support to this task.<sup>20</sup>

If John Paul II is correct concerning his diagnosis of the problem, we should therefore expect that a philosophical tradition that takes the interrelation between faith and reason seriously will have much insight to offer to our contemporary situation. The postulation of a fruitful relationship between faith and philosophic rationality was typical of the medieval intellectual project. Thus, the question naturally arises whether medieval philosophy can offer medication to an ailing postmodern world?

The purpose of this paper is to explore the viability of that idea. The scope of this exploration must unfortunately be placed within certainly narrowly defined limits. First of all, it will not be possible to offer an extended defense of John Paul II's assessment of the philosophical *status quo*. I will assume that he has correctly described the contemporary milieu and see if an alternative to postmodern fragmentation is possible. Second, any attempt to characterize *the* postmodern tradition would be tendentious. Rather than try to paint postmodernity with a single brush stroke, I will choose an illustrative example of a postmodern intellectual, Richard Rorty, who provides an interesting case in point. Nevertheless, Rorty's commitment to historicism, immanence, contingency and conceptual relativism could, in principle, be extended to other postmodern figures. Third, after a brief attempt to characterize the salient features of the tradition of medieval philosophy, attention will be given primarily to Aquinas's moderate realism and his conception of the complementarity of reason and faith.

## THE MEDIEVAL PROJECT

### *The "Quid Sit" of Medieval Philosophy*

If we are to understand how the spirit of medieval philosophy may have a constructive impact upon philosophizing in a postmodern world, we must have an account of the former's nature before we can see how it may be applied to the latter. Taking the concept "Christian philosophy" as an instance of medieval philosophy, Étienne Gilson observed that there is some doubt

<sup>19</sup> For instance, *FR* offers a refutation of skepticism along these lines; see chap. 3, no. 29. The following paragraphs take up the importance of testimony and the social dimension of knowledge. *FR*, chap. 3, nos. 31ff.

<sup>20</sup> *FR*, chap. 2, no. 20.

“whether the very concept of ‘Christian Philosophy’ has any real meaning . . . and whether there was ever any corresponding reality.”<sup>21</sup>

This question is most difficult to answer because answering it depends upon our conception of what philosophy is. Furthermore, unless we regard “philosophy” as merely an accidental succession of incommensurable conversations, then we must conceive of medieval philosophy in terms of its continuity with the present.<sup>22</sup> If we have an arbitrarily narrow conception of what philosophy is about for us, then we will have a correspondingly provincial conception of whether medieval thought counts as philosophical. This is the crux of the problem, since modern philosophy until the mid-point of the present century generally regarded medieval thought as engaged in a self-contradictory endeavor. Postmodernity challenges the very conception of reason that sustained modernity’s expulsion of the scholastics from the philosophical fold. But, it also accepts late modernity’s flight from transcendence.

As we shall see, the medieval project provides a vantage point from which to critique not only modernity’s conception of philosophical rationality, but also the late-modern skeptical presumption that attainment of truth could only occur according to those standards of rationality. The dynamic interrelation between faith and reason is an important source of this balanced view. If we are to see the contemporary value of medieval philosophy, we must open ourselves to the possibility of this constructive challenge.

### *The Connection Between Medieval Thought and Christianity*

The historical record indicates that throughout the medieval period, in addition to theological treatises, there were independent traditions of logical,

<sup>21</sup> Étienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), pp. 1–2.

<sup>22</sup> This remark is intentionally cautious, precisely because Richard Rorty makes the opposite claim about the history of philosophy. See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. xiii ff., 3ff., and 389ff. This counter-claim is integral to his pluralistic attitude toward what counts as philosophical inquiry. The view of this analysis is that we can accept his critique of the Cartesian turn in philosophy without embracing his postmodern skepticism, which includes the incommensurable character of philosophical traditions. For an apparently contradictory remark, acknowledging the unity of philosophical experience, see *ibid.*, p. 33.

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natural scientific, jurisprudential and medical inquiry, to name a few.<sup>23</sup> One might argue that Gilson erroneously harnessed medieval philosophy to Christian philosophy and attempted to identify philosophy with those other sorts of intellectual activities.<sup>24</sup> Such an approach is conceivable but not satisfactory. As Gilson argued, the interaction between reason and religious faith was central to the intellectual milieu of the period.<sup>25</sup>

Consider, for instance, whether we should call Boethius a logician or a theologian? Or more importantly, is Boethius thinking as a Christian or a philosopher when he encounters Lady Philosophy in his cell and discusses with her the correct path to human happiness? Consider further how we shall draw precise boundaries between Aquinas's "philosophy" and his "theology." Some of his most fertile reflections on philosophical problems relating to free will and human agency can be found in those places where he discusses the will and sin of the angels.<sup>26</sup> Ockham provides another interesting case in point. There would arguably have been no treatise on quantity, as Ockham wrote it, without his concern to solve certain problems necessary for the explanation of the doctrine of the Eucharist. In fact, this point could be generalized to many important advances in natural philosophy, logic and other areas. Problems of foreknowledge and predestination, for instance, undoubtedly fueled careful reflections in modal logic. These examples not only indicate that there were "philosophic Christians" as Gilson put it, but that their Christian worldview frequently had an integral role to play in the formation of their philosophic outlook.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Gilson was also well aware of the contributions of Jewish and Islamic scholars. For the present purpose, it can be assumed that "Christian Philosophy," if it is intelligible, is an instance of a broader dialogue between reason and religious faith in the Middle Ages. Furthermore, while it must be granted that some thinkers, such as Averroes, drew sharp distinctions between reason and faith, those positions were still deployed within the context of such a dialogue.

<sup>24</sup> This was the position of some of Gilson's critics, notably Fernand Van Steenberghen. See Van Steenberghen, *Introduction à l'étude de la philosophie médiévale* (Paris: Béatrice-Nauwelaerts, 1974). More recent efforts have recognized, to various degrees, integral connections between philosophical and theological problems in medieval philosophers. For an excellent survey of these positions see Jan Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals: The Case of Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), pp. 1–24. This paper does not aim to critique any one of the current points of view in the debate, but rather to call critical attention to certain problematic assumptions that frame the debate, namely our understanding of what constitutes properly philosophical inquiry.

<sup>25</sup> See Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, pp. 2ff. *et passim*.

<sup>26</sup> See *Summa Theologiae* I, qq. 59 and 63. Hereafter cited as *ST*.

<sup>27</sup> Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, pp. 2ff.

We see the truth of this point both at the beginning and straight through to the end of the medieval period. St. Augustine, for instance, draws his *Contra Academicos* to a close with the following epistemological strategy:

[N]o one doubts that we're prompted to learn by the twin forces of authority and reason. Therefore, I'm resolved not to depart from the authority of Christ on any score whatsoever. . . . As for what is to be sought out by the most subtle reasoning—for my character is such that I'm impatient in my desire to apprehend what the truth is not only by belief but also by understanding—I'm still confident that I'm going to find it with the Platonists, and that it won't be opposed to our Holy Writ.<sup>28</sup>

This strategy was to give birth to the project of “faith seeking understanding,” which served as an important model for the pursuit of wisdom throughout the Middle Ages. Aquinas adopts a similar procedure at the beginning of the *Summa Contra Gentiles* when he proposes that, for those points which do not admit of demonstration, reason can adduce refutations of counter-arguments against them.<sup>29</sup> More significantly, in his own treatment of the intellect and the process of cognition, St. Thomas refers explicitly to Augustine's epistemological strategy.<sup>30</sup>

This strategy envisions fruitful cooperation between reason and faith as twin sources of access to truth. Faith not only provides the starting points for certain specific theological conclusions, but as Ralph McInerny has pointed out, it guides the sort of “research projects” which will seem worth pursuing to the Christian philosopher, and even suggests fruitful and pointless avenues of inquiry.<sup>31</sup> There is an important distinction between philosophy and sacred theology. The latter begins explicitly from revealed premises and reasons from them to specific conclusions as from authoritative starting points. Christian philosophy, on the other hand, begins with faith as forming a tradition of inquiry and providing an important external source of boundary conditions in the search for truth.<sup>32</sup> The Christian philosopher aims for consistency between the truths of reason and faith, but, he or she proceeds by the discipline's own internal standards of verification.

The result of faith's contribution to philosophy is seen in a certain kind of

<sup>28</sup> Augustine, *Contra Academicos* in *Against the Academicians / The Teacher*, trans. Peter King (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Press, 1995), Bk. III, chap. 20, no. 43, p. 92.

<sup>29</sup> See *Summa Contra Gentiles* I, chap. 9.

<sup>30</sup> *ST I*, q. 84, a. 5.

<sup>31</sup> See Ralph McInerny, “Reflections on Christian Philosophy,” in Zagzebski, *Rational Faith*, pp. 273ff.

<sup>32</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 266.

epistemological optimism. At one level, faith provides confidence because reason has a companion to guide and sometimes to correct its own tentative steps. At another level, faith provides the Christian philosopher with evidence to support belief in the proper working order of reason's own truth-gathering capacities. That is, we know by faith that we were created by an intelligent being who has ordered us toward a *telos* which includes coming to know Him. This *telos* demands that the "research project" of radical philosophical skepticism must be misguided.<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps the most striking illustration of this point with regard to medieval Christian philosophy is none other than William of Ockham. Modern critics of Ockham's thought have accused the Venerable Inceptor's conceptualism not only of being responsible for unraveling the widespread medieval commitment to moderate realism, but also of being a form of proto-skepticism.<sup>34</sup> It is, no doubt, true that Ockham's refusal to countenance an isomorphic relationship between our general concepts and the structure of the external world raised very difficult questions about the relationship between thought and its object. It is also reasonable to hold that those profound difficulties contributed to the development of Cartesian dualism and the modern turn toward problems in epistemology, especially the skeptical worries generated by epistemic internalism. But, it is equally important to maintain that Ockham himself was not a skeptic. He was, in fact, confident about the human mind's capacity to know the external world through the certainty of intuitive cognition.<sup>35</sup> It is hard to see what could have sustained Ockham's optimism other than his commitment to the project of "faith seeking understanding," when we compare that commitment to the temperament of modern skepticism which followed his lead concerning cognition.

Postmodernists have rightfully pointed out that no philosophical project

<sup>33</sup> It is beyond the scope of the present inquiry to treat this point fully, since various Christian traditions have viewed the appropriate degree of confidence we should have in natural reason differently, due to divergent viewpoints concerning the corruptive influence of sinfulness. Zagzebski points out, for instance, that Catholic philosophers have tended to be more confident about our cognitive capacities than Protestant traditions generally (Zagzebski, *Rational Faith*, p. 207). But, even among Protestant philosophers, an argument can be made for a healthy degree of optimism about reason's capacities. See Caleb Miller, "Faith and Reason," *Reason for the Hope Within*, ed. Michael J. Murray (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 135-64.

<sup>34</sup> See Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 3. See also Josephus Gretd, O.S.B., *Elementa philosophiae Aristotelico-Thomisticae*, 10th ed., vol. 1 (Freiburg: Herder, 1953), pp. 94-96.

<sup>35</sup> This point is cogently argued for by Marilyn Adams in her magnum opus on Ockham's philosophy. See Marilyn McCord Adams, *William Ockham* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), especially vol. 1, pp. 495-550.



begins in a vacuum. Indeed, Alvin Plantinga, who is by no means a postmodernist, has argued that modern philosophy, which has tended to view the idea of tradition-bound inquiry as antithetical to philosophy, has its own set of traditions and boundary constraints.<sup>36</sup> Postmodernists have called our attention to this contextual aspect of philosophizing, but have further concluded that recognition of this point makes the attainment of transcendent truth an impossible ideal. Two questions then need to be answered. Can medieval philosophy as Christian philosophy challenge our loss of confidence in truth and can we make a space for medieval Christian philosophy as philosophy? In order to answer the first question, it is worth turning to a specific example: Aquinas's metaphysical realism.

#### *Thomistic Moderate Realism*

St. Thomas's moderate realism is an interesting case in point, because it lies in the middle ground between Platonic ultra-realism and nominalist minimalism. Like the Platonic realist and unlike the nominalist, Aquinas postulates an isomorphic relationship between concepts and the structure of extra-mental reality. Like the nominalist and unlike the Platonist, Aquinas holds there are only individual extra-mental existents.<sup>37</sup> Significantly, this position commits him to the view that there is a formal identity between the knower and the known, what John Haldane has recently labeled "mind-world identity theory."<sup>38</sup> As Haldane has argued, this form of metaphysical realism, precisely in virtue of its mind-world identity thesis, stands out as one of the best possible alternatives to contemporary versions of anti-realism late-modern skepticism.

In order to make this point, Haldane draws a useful distinction between three varieties of realism and anti-realism: ontological, epistemic, and semantic versions.<sup>39</sup> Ontological realism is a thesis about the mind-independence of reality and its underlying structure. Epistemological realism concerns our ability to use thought and language in order to represent accurately that mind-

<sup>36</sup> See Alvin Plantinga, "Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century," in *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, ed. James F. Sennett (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 330ff. See also McInerney, "Reflections on Christian Philosophy," in Zagzebski, *Rational Faith*, p. 266.

<sup>37</sup> See e.g. *ST I*, q. 84, a. 1, and also *De ente et essentia*, IV, "non potest dici quod ratio generis, speciei, differentiae conveniat essentiae secundum quod est quaedam res existens extra singularia. . . ."

<sup>38</sup> For Aquinas's position see *ST I*, q. 84, aa. 1–4, 6. See also John Haldane, "Mind-World Identity Theory and the Anti-Realist Challenge," *Reality, Representation and Projection*, eds. John Haldane and Crispin Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 15–37.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15–17.

independent reality. The road to skepticism is paved with what appears to be a paradoxical tension between the demands of epistemological and ontological realism. The epistemological realist must hold that there is some intrinsic relation between thought and its objects that allows thought to identify them correctly.<sup>40</sup> The ontological realist must hold that the world exists independently of our capacity to grasp it or not.<sup>41</sup> The result is that the “evidence transcendence” of ontological realism and the required relation between mind and world of epistemological realism come into conflict. As Haldane points out, recent “semantic anti-realism” appears to be a response to this conflict, for it denies as unintelligible the thesis that the truth-conditions of thought and language may transcend our cognitional capacities.<sup>42</sup> It is no accident that worries about this tension have been the catalyst which has drawn some analytic philosophers closer to the postmodern fold.

Granted the viability of the semantic anti-realist’s concerns, the only way out of this decline into skepticism is to hold together epistemological and ontological realism through the mediation of the world-directedness of our concepts to the very mind-independent structures of reality. As Haldane points out, Aquinas’s metaphysical realism, which postulates the formal identity of the knower and the known, does precisely this.<sup>43</sup> The “mind-world identity thesis,” if it can be accepted, therefore constitutes a potent response to postmodern anti-realism. It offers an account of cognition that can hold together epistemological and ontological realism, without turning to the failed project of Cartesian internalism. Moreover, because postmodernity has taught us to question the viability of putative naturalistic and positivistic reductions, we cannot therefore dispense *a priori* with the move to account for realism in terms of formal identity. Moderate realism holds out the prospect of restoring the world-directedness of our concepts and challenging the postmodern fragmentation of the mind’s capacity to access transcendent truth. It is therefore most interesting to observe with Maritain and Gilson that Aquinas’s stance as a philosophical realist is bound up with his Christian philosophical understanding of the complementarity of reason and religious faith.

### *Reason, Faith, and Realism*

This point can be illustrated by a comparison of Descartes and Aquinas. For Descartes, the matter of the veracity of our knowledge of the external

<sup>40</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>41</sup> See William Alston, *A Realist Conception of Truth* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 170, 199ff.

<sup>42</sup> See Haldane, “Mind-World Identity Theory and the Anti-Realist Challenge,” p. 17.

<sup>43</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 19ff.

world was a persistent difficulty. It was not merely an impediment to a different project that could develop a constructive philosophy. Rather, it was the source of a philosophical principle, the Cartesian methodic doubt, which functioned as an explicit premise or background condition for every attempt at constructive philosophizing.<sup>44</sup> Descartes motivates this methodic doubt by examining numerous apparent paradoxes of perception, which highlight our tendencies to make erroneous judgments. For Descartes, the dubitability of perception requires us to reject the veracity of our sense powers and intellectual judgments until we can deduce their truthfulness from principles known with certainty.

Remarkably, despite the fact that they were aware of the very same perceptual difficulties and tendencies toward error, Aquinas and his predecessors were essentially innocent of this Cartesian problem. To be sure, Augustine experienced similar skeptical concerns as those that plagued Descartes, but as we have noted above, they did not issue in the methodic doubt.<sup>45</sup> Rather, Augustine made his best attempt to dispose of skeptical worries in the *Contra Academicos*, and then proceeded to philosophize in the light of faith. To be sure, there was ample room for a skeptical problem to emerge for Aquinas as well, even though it did not.<sup>46</sup>

In the *Summa Theologiae*, for instance, while discussing the question whether intellectual knowledge is derived from experience of the sensible world, he raises the point made by Augustine and later adopted by Descartes that it is difficult to offer a strategy for distinguishing internally dream states from waking ones.<sup>47</sup> In the *De Veritate* Aquinas demonstrates that he is aware of a subtle and complex range of more technical examples of perceptual error. Question 1, article 11, for instance, asks whether there is falsity in the senses. Aquinas presents an intriguing example in one of the *sed contra*'s to the article. He notes that when we regard an object through colored glass, the object appears to have the color of the glass, not its own color.<sup>48</sup> Hence, sensation can apparently be in error, even with respect to its proper object. Aquinas's resolution of this situation does not deny fundamentally the reality of perceptual and intellectual error.

It is therefore remarkable that he was simply not attracted by the sort of

<sup>44</sup> See e.g. René Descartes, *Meditationes de prima philosophia* in *Œuvres de Descartes*, eds. Adam and Tannery (Paris: Cerf, 1897–1913), vol. 7, p. 18ff.

<sup>45</sup> Gilson argues this point at length. See Étienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), pp. 155–59.

<sup>46</sup> For Aquinas's explicit discussion of Augustine's strategy, see *ST I*, q. 84, a. 5.

<sup>47</sup> *ST I*, q. 84, a. 6, obj. 1.

<sup>48</sup> *De Veritate*, q. 1, a. 11, sc 3.

internalist epistemological problems which captivated Descartes. We can be certain of this because he expressly treated a parallel case, namely whether the intelligible species or concept is that which we understand or that *by which* we understand. In *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 85, a. 2, he poses a series of objections that essentially profess the Cartesian view that we are immediately aware of our ideas and only indirectly aware of the external world. In response to this viewpoint Aquinas maintains that the Cartesian position is “manifestly false.”<sup>49</sup> Significantly though, he does not offer any detailed argument in defense of his view. He just proposes two considerations that serve to reaffirm his commitment to mind-world identity theory. First, he notes that what we understand are the objects of science, and if we grant the “Cartesian” position, then there will be no science of extra-mental reality.<sup>50</sup> Second, he observes that granting the “Cartesian” position would lead to conceptual relativism, since the measure of truth would need to be the mind and not extra-mental reality.<sup>51</sup> Most importantly, these two considerations are not proofs of ontological and epistemological realism, they presume the truth of both standpoints.

We may therefore reasonably ask, why is it that Aquinas finds Cartesian representationalism, as well as the various forms of anti-realism and conceptual relativism, to be simply uninteresting and fundamentally misguided epistemological strategies? The answer that naturally suggests itself is that faith is providing important guidance to the sort of research projects which seem reasonable and worthy of pursuit. No other likely explanation is available, certainly not ignorance of the possibility of perceptual and cognitive error. Descartes’s epistemological strategy is simply inconsistent with what Aquinas takes to be true about our nature as rational agents and our *telos* within the created order. Jacques Maritain puts this point succinctly in *The Peasant of the Garonne*:

<sup>49</sup> *ST* I, q. 85, a. 2: “. . . secundum hoc intellectus nihil intelligit nisi suam passionem scilicet speciem intelligibilem in se receptam. Sed haec opinio manifeste apparet falsa. . . .”

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, “Si igitur ea quae intelligimus essent solum species quae sunt in anima, sequeretur quod scientiae omnes non essent de rebus quae sunt extra animam, sed solum de speciebus intelligibilibus quae sunt in anima. . . .”

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, “Secundo, quia sequeretur error antiquorum dicentium ‘omne quod videtur est verum,’ et similiter quod contradictoriae essent simul verae. Si enim potentia non cognoscit nisi propriam passionem, de ea solum iudicat. Sic autem videtur aliquod, secundum quod potentia cognoscitiva afficitur. Semper ergo iudicium potentiae cognoscitivae erit de eo quod iudicat, scilicet de propria passione, secundum quod est; et ita omne iudicium erit verum.”

Reason has its own domain, and faith hers. But reason can enter the domain of faith by bringing there its need to ask questions, its desire to discover the internal order of the true, and its aspiration to wisdom. . . . And faith can enter the domain of reason, bringing along the help of a light and a truth which are superior, and which elevate reason in its own order—that is what happens with Christian philosophy. . . . Not only does faith place in our path certain signals (“*Danger: Winding Roads,*” etc.) thanks to which our little saloon-car runs less risks. But, above all, faith can help us from within to overcome allurements and irrational dreams to which, without assistance coming from a source superior to reason, we would be disposed to yield.<sup>52</sup>

The force of Aquinas’s commitment to rejecting the denial of mind-world identity theory as “manifestly false” also makes greater sense when we consider his understanding of the virtue of faith. Considered formally, the proper object of the virtue of faith is the first truth, namely God Himself. But, considered materially, the virtue of faith extends to all those things, including the nature of the created world, which bear any relation to the first truth and our attainment of it.<sup>53</sup> Two significant points follow from this. First, faith is a cognitive habit, since its object is truth.<sup>54</sup> More specifically, it is midway between science and opinion.<sup>55</sup> It shares the firmness of assent with science, but incompleteness of understanding with opinion.<sup>56</sup> Faith’s firmness of assent comes not from reason being compelled by the force of the evidence; rather it is strengthened by an appetitive component, an act of choice.<sup>57</sup> This act of choice is of course voluntary, although assent is only given to what is credible, and the will is sustained in its act by grace. Thus, Aquinas’s strength of commitment to metaphysical realism, by virtue of its relation to more central matters of faith, despite the absence of a deductive argument for it, should neither be surprising nor regarded as irrational. Second, the virtue of faith provides not only a certain type of cognition, but also an ethical imperative. We assent to what faith entails in part because it is fitting for us to do so in light of our interest in the attainment of our *telos* or the goal of human fulfillment.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne*, pp. 142–43.

<sup>53</sup> See *ST II-II*, q. 1, a. 1.

<sup>54</sup> See *ST II-II*, q. 4, a. 2; See *ST II-II*, q. 2, a. 1.

<sup>55</sup> See *ST II-II*, q. 1, aa. 2, 4, 5.

<sup>56</sup> See *ST II-II*, q. 1, a. 4, See *ST II-II*, q. 2, a. 9, ad 2. For a good discussion of this point see Laura García, “Natural Theology and the Reformed Objection,” *Christian Perspectives on Religious Knowledge*, eds. C. Stephen Evans and Merold Westphal (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 127ff.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> See *ST II-II*, q. 2, aa. 3–9, See *ST II-II*, q. 4, a. 5.

For Aquinas, then, skepticism and anti-realism not only fail to be fruitful epistemological strategies, they frustrate the attainment of the good of our nature. Thus, we have an ethical obligation to avoid such unproductive belief policies. In a remark which applies fittingly not only to his view of the need for faith with regard to specifically theological truths, but also with respect to human cognition generally, Aquinas explicitly endorses the Augustinian thesis that unless we believe we shall not understand. Interestingly enough, he credits it to Aristotle as a general thesis about knowledge. This constitutes a resounding reversal of Descartes's methodical doubt:

Man becomes a participant of this discipline [the knowledge of natural and supernatural beatitude] not immediately, but successively, according to the mode of his nature. But for every human being to learn it is necessary that he should believe, so that he shall attain the perfect degree of scientific knowledge; just as the Philosopher says that "it is necessary to believe in order to learn."<sup>59</sup>

We can therefore see that Aquinas's commitment to epistemological and ontological realism in general are bound up with his view of the appropriate relation between reason and faith, a view which is characteristic of the medieval philosophical tradition.

*Aquinas and Putnam: an Example*

A striking example of how this tradition presents a constructive challenge, not only to the modern philosophical project, but also to postmodern anti-realism can be illustrated by comparing Aquinas to Hilary Putnam on the very subject of metaphysical realism. In his recent work *Realism with a Human Face*, Putnam speculates about the reasons for rejecting metaphysical realism.<sup>60</sup> His answer depends in part upon the possibility of what he calls "equivalent descriptions" or "notational variants" in scientific theories.<sup>61</sup> Simply put, there are some theoretical interpretations of physical phenomena which suppose very different ontologies, but which have negligible implications for "actual scientific practice."<sup>62</sup> Because of such "equivalent descriptions" Putnam reaches the quasi-Kantian conclusion that we are trapped in our conceptual schemes and that, in some sense, reality is theory-laden.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>59</sup> See *ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 3.

<sup>60</sup> Hilary Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 39.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> See *ibid.*, 40–41.

Remarkably, Aquinas was aware of similar circumstances, but did not feel compelled to draw the same anti-realist conclusions. On several occasions, for instance, he discusses the Ptolemaic theory of planetary epicycles.<sup>64</sup> Thomas observes that the Ptolemaic theory, which is discordant with the Aristotelian account, saves the phenomena, but remains a supposition because the discovery of some other theory, which accounts for the phenomena equally well, is a distinct possibility.<sup>65</sup> Significantly, his discussion of this case in the *Summa Theologiae*, occurs in the treatise on the Trinity. He compares the Ptolemaic theory of epicycles and eccentrics to the rational support for the doctrine of the Trinity. Granted the truth of each position, reason provides evidence lending confirmation to the viewpoint which should not be mistaken as sufficient proof that things are exactly as we suppose them to be.

This example is illuminating, because in the case of the Trinity, our concerns about the imperfection of our rational inquiry into the doctrine are tempered by the understanding that is acquired through faith. In the same way, the limitation of our ability to grasp the true nature of the planetary motions, does not present for Aquinas a test-case which catapults him into skepticism or anti-realism. Unlike the Trinity, of course, Aquinas's faith does not provide a ready-made set of metaphysical realist postulates, especially ones concerning the nature of the motions of the heavens. In fact, given the later history of this question, it is worth noting that Aquinas is careful to point out that the suppositions of the astronomers of his time must be regarded quite tentatively.<sup>66</sup> It does, however, provide him with the conviction that there is truth, and that we can know and articulate it. That he could be mistaken about the true nature of this reality, Thomas was quite willing to entertain, but that he should be systematically deceived and incapable of articulating genuine knowledge claims about an independent world was simply not a reasonable alternative for him.

### *Interim Conclusions*

Granted that the foregoing discussion of Aquinas and others is correct, we have reason to take seriously the constructive challenge to both modernism and postmodernism which medieval philosophy represents. As we shall see below, the modern habit of mind tends to deny medieval philosophy its proper place at the table, while the postmodern viewpoint is less exclusive,

<sup>64</sup> See *ST I*, q. 32, a. 1, ad 2; *Sententia de caelo et mundo*, Bk. I, lect. 3; Bk. II, lect. 17.

<sup>65</sup> See *ibid.*, Bk. II, lect. 17.

<sup>66</sup> See *ibid.*

but at the high cost of denying transcendent truth. The spirit of medieval philosophy helps us to examine both those stances critically.

### THE MODERN AND POSTMODERN PROJECTS

#### *Gilson: Rationalism and the Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*

While philosopher-theologians like Aquinas were acutely aware of their complicated relationship to classical learning, they quite properly regarded themselves as contributing to the conversation of the Western philosophical tradition, even as they sought to transform it into the wine of Christian wisdom.<sup>67</sup> Granting that we can reconcile the medieval thinker's self-images to the practice of philosophy, it is not clear that we ourselves can regard what they were doing as philosophical practice. Thanks to certain lines of thought popular in the early and middle portions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a consensus emerged about the nature of philosophy itself that was incompatible with doing so. The radical empiricist methods of figures such as A. J. Ayer, which banished as meaningless statements that do not admit of strict empirical verification, could not allow that medieval thought was properly philosophical.<sup>68</sup> Given their presuppositions, they were, of course, correct.

The question remains, was such an account of philosophy's essential nature provincial or purificatory? Gilson was cognizant of this problem, which he labeled "pure rationalism" in *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*. He took the positivist challenge so seriously that he made it the focal point of his departure, asking whether it was simply contradictory to speak of a spirit of medieval philosophy, precisely because collaboration between reason and faith was an impossible illusion.<sup>69</sup> He then astutely pointed out that medieval thinkers had their own internal understanding of the nature of rational evidence which guided their reflections in an ordered and predictable manner. To label this understanding as unphilosophical is to offer a questionable *a priori* criterion for the nature of such evidence.<sup>70</sup> Gilson concluded: "[W]hen reason starts making these arbitrary exclusions, it loses the right to judge."<sup>71</sup> Despite this strong stand in support of the charge of philosophical provincialism, he followed up the point immediately with the admission that, "I have no illusions as to the efficacy of my remark. . . . It will in no way change the

<sup>67</sup> See *Expositio super librum Boethii de Trinitate*, q. 2, a. 3, ad 5.

<sup>68</sup> See A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1952).

<sup>69</sup> Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, p. 3.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 406.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*



accepted outlook. . . ."<sup>72</sup> Gilson was correct on both scores. It was philosophical provincialism and the time was not ripe in the philosophical mainstream for his remarks.

### *The Turn to Postmodernity*

Times have changed, however, and so has the mainstream philosophical landscape. The clearest indication of this fact is that critics of modernity have raised Gilson's principal concern about the *a priori* determination of standards of rational evidence by logical empiricism, and logical empiricism itself has thereby been called into question. With the move from provincialism to pluralism, however, other developments which threaten the continued relevance of important constructive strands in medieval thought, especially metaphysical realism, have arisen as well. Postmodernity saves a space at the philosophical table for medieval philosophy only by undermining the integrity of all traditional philosophical projects. It is beyond the scope of the present inquiry to defend that claim in its full generality, but, as we have mentioned above, it is well accepted that postmodernists share profound suspicions about representation and transcendent truth.

An interesting case that illustrates this point is Richard Rorty's skeptical presentation of the remaining task left to philosophy as concerning only hermeneutic "therapy." On the one hand, Rorty's critique of the Cartesian epistemological turn challenges the view of reason which allowed modern philosophy to dismiss the project of integrating faith and reason as intellectually second rate. On the other hand, he holds that we will not find a solution in a new and more successful metaphysical and epistemological stance from which we may guarantee access to truth. The task left for philosophy is to help us overcome this desire by entering into the clear light of pragmatism, where truth is replaced by utility.

If Rorty and his intellectual compatriots are correct, then not only Aquinas's moderate realism, but also Ockham's realistic conceptualism must be discarded as so much useless baggage. Two points need to be made about this development. First, the postmodern critique of modernity must concur with Gilson's assertion that the medieval project cannot be dismissed *a priori* as unphilosophical. Thus, postmodernity's confidence about its critique of transcendent truth may well be overstated, and postmodernists ought to take a much more serious look at *fides quaerens intellectum*. Second, it is also worth pointing out that such is the pluralism of the present state of philosophy, that voices like Rorty's are not the only ones to be heard. Within the an-

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

alytic tradition from which Rorty takes his point of departure, for instance, some philosophers have even experienced a renaissance of interest in philosophical realism.<sup>73</sup>

Perhaps the best way to illustrate where the spirit of medieval philosophy may be placed with respect to the contemporary scene then is to examine two brief examples, Richard Rorty's project of hermeneutic therapy and the more hopeful case presented in John McDowell's recent monograph *Mind and World*. Remarkably, the latter work makes certain very promising moves in the direction of Aristotelian realism, which strengthen the suggestion that medieval thought may provide constructive assistance to our present intellectual circumstances.

*Richard Rorty: Against the Cartesian Epistemological Turn*

The benefit of examining Rorty's position is that it offers an argument that unequivocally acknowledges the philosophical character of medieval thought, even going so far as to allow that dynamic interaction between faith and reason may constitute properly rational and philosophical inquiry. Despite this benefit, Rorty's more pluralistic conception of philosophy is simultaneously useful and hostile to the spirit of medieval thought. In essence, Rorty salvages a place for medieval thought in the philosophical fold by detonating the project of philosophy itself. There are no *a priori* objections to counting "faith seeking understanding" as philosophy, because all systematic attempts to philosophize are socially constructed and ultimately unjustifiable themselves.

There is another relevant worry concerning Rorty's blurring of the lines between the disciplines that needs some brief consideration. That is, it may appear to clash directly with medieval conceptions of the distinction between philosophy and theology. In fact, medieval recognition of this distinction may appear to be a tacit endorsement of the logical empiricist position. The apparent difficulty here arises from failing to keep separate two notions: that of distinct starting points and that of incommensurable modes of inquiry.<sup>74</sup>

The Medievals were well aware of the difference between propositions depending upon human reason and those depending upon faith.<sup>75</sup> There was no simple-minded effort to mix reason and revelation indiscriminately. Aquinas, for instance, was careful to distinguish natural theology as a part of philosophy,

<sup>73</sup> See especially John Haldane, "Mind-World Identity Theory and the Anti-Realist Challenge." See *Essays on Moral Realism*, ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1988).

<sup>74</sup> For a similar line of argument see Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne*, pp. 141ff.

<sup>75</sup> See Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*.

which takes its principles from human reason, and sacred doctrine which takes its principles from faith. He does, however, also affirm that sacred doctrine is a *scientia* and that it borrows from philosophical reasoning.<sup>76</sup> More specifically, sacred doctrine is a subalternate *scientia* because it takes its principles from another science inaccessible to human reason. The fact that it is subalternated renders it no less a *scientia*. Aquinas stresses this point by making a comparison to the learning process in many other sciences. It is sometimes the case that the pupil must take certain principles of a subalternate science for granted in order to progress in the understanding of that science.<sup>77</sup> He argues that this case is parallel to the case of sacred doctrine, where the principles of the higher science transcend human reason. Moreover, although ultimately understanding is the ground of every science, the proximate starting point of a subalternate science can be belief.<sup>78</sup> Once we have the principles in a subalternate science, whether proximately by reason or belief, we then proceed to reason from the principles to conclusions. In this latter respect, all the sciences are the same.

Our primary interest here is not in sacred doctrine considered in itself, but in the implications of these points for our understanding of the connection between philosophy and theology. Because sacred doctrine is a *scientia*, and one which can subsume philosophical principles, and because the mode of reasoning is the same as that of philosophical sciences, there is no reason to regard the two as incommensurable, even though their starting points are distinct. Hence, Aquinas's distinction is not that of modern empiricism, because he does not think there is a fundamental impenetrability of meaning between the two.

It is then plausible to maintain that we may extend Aquinas's argument from theology back to philosophy, although his remarks make the reverse point, by enlarging the notion of philosophical inquiry to include that which is made in the context of faith. This point is amenable to Rorty's argument insofar as he wants to call into question the artificial barrier between the two. It is not compatible with his position insofar as he detonates the distinction altogether by means of a social constructionist conception of knowledge. Because Aquinas is a realist and Rorty a conceptual relativist, the former can sustain the distinction between starting points whereas the latter cannot. It remains to be seen whether this latter aspect of Rorty's program can be resisted.

We can explore that point with help of an example, namely Rorty's diagnosis of a familiar historical incident, the debate between Galileo and Cardinal Bellarmine about the status of Galileo's astronomical theory. When Galileo

<sup>76</sup> See *Expositio super librum Boethii de trinitate*, q. 2, a. 3.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* q. 2, a. 2, ad 5.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, q. 2, a. 2, ad 6.

maintained that the heliocentric conception of the solar system was a true description of the way things objectively are, Bellarmine countered by suggesting that Galileo's theory might be a useful tool which saved the phenomena and had certain practical applications, but was open to question. In defending this suggestion, he appealed to scriptural evidence which he thought pointed to the Ptolemaic character of the universe.<sup>79</sup> We may now have good reason to think that Bellarmine had the losing side of the argument, both from the point of view of natural science and Aquinas's observations about the tentative status of the Ptolemaic theory mentioned above, but that is quite beside the point.

As Rorty comments: "Much of the seventeenth century's notion of what it was to be a 'philosopher,' and much of the Enlightenment's notion of what it was to be 'rational,' turns on Galileo being absolutely right and the church absolutely wrong. To suggest that there is room for rational disagreement here . . . is to endanger the very notion of 'philosophy.'" <sup>80</sup> Rorty offers the apparently startling conclusion that we must give up this conception of the limits of meaning in philosophy and with it our unshakable confidence in excluding Bellarmine and his evidence from the discussion.<sup>81</sup> But, given the alternative that Rorty tries to put in its place, this result has been established at a very high price. Rorty's diagnosis of the Galileo-Bellarmino struggle depends upon his acceptance of the model of change in scientific theories proposed by Thomas Kuhn in "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions."<sup>82</sup> According to Kuhn and Rorty, scientific paradigms do not have objective evidence which confirms or disconfirms them from a neutral standpoint; they are social constructions of their adherents.

In the final chapter of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* Rorty proposes his hermeneutic project. We are faced with a dichotomy he argues: either modern rationalism is correct or everything is socially constructed. Faced with this dilemma, philosophy must become reactive and parasitic upon all forms of systematization, with its remaining task being one of "edification" rather than construction.<sup>83</sup> Edification does not consist in a search for truth, because it is outside the socially constructed paradigms within which we may speak about truth. With conceptual relativism, goes also the disintegration of philosophy. It becomes merely an accidental succession of turns in a conversation, no longer Gilson's *philosophia perennis*.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 329.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 328.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 329.

<sup>82</sup> See T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970). See also Rorty, p. 324.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 360-66.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 391.

With the replacement of systematization by therapy, the notion of the objectivity of truth also disappears. Rorty's commitment to this point has become even more emphatic in recent work after *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. In "Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism," for instance, he conceives of his task as a "protest against the idea that human beings must humble themselves before something non-human, whether the Will of God or the Intrinsic Nature of Reality."<sup>85</sup> Drawing upon the work of John Dewey, Rorty compares our ceasing to take the concept of truth seriously to the modern secular rejection of a divine being and a transcendent moral order. We must, he says, "set aside *any* authority save that of a consensus of our fellow humans."<sup>86</sup> When we do so, we will no longer look upon the world as an "authority" we must respect.

This attitude is a startling confirmation of John Paul II's thesis that post-modernism (at least of the Rortian variety) does not break with, but is an exaggerated continuation of the modern immanentist habit of mind. One must wonder seriously why some postmodernists see fit to shake Enlightenment rationality down to its foundations without challenging this perceived wisdom. Is there a loss of intellectual fortitude when it comes to breaking this taboo? More significantly, can such a position be a reasonable epistemological strategy? As William Alston has rightly observed, it looks like this attitude betrays a paradoxical unwillingness to accept our finitude, to accept the sometimes painful intrusion of reality into the ivory towers of our conceptual schemes. Perhaps the medievals, who lived in a less sanitized cultural space than ourselves, and who understood very well the reality of suffering and death, were better placed to see the mind-independent structure of reality.

Second, it is clear that Rorty's path offers a high price to pay for allowing medieval thought to return to the table of philosophy. But, perhaps we need not go down Rorty's path the same distance he has. Fortunately, there are a number of more hopeful alternatives to Rorty. Among them is the work of John McDowell.

#### *McDowell: Mind's Answerability to the World*

Both Rorty and McDowell agree that the present task of philosophy is therapeutic rather than constructive, in the sense that we must overcome the Cartesian picture of the world by rejecting it, rather than attempting to articulate another epistemological position within it.<sup>87</sup> Whereas Rorty disposes

<sup>85</sup> Rorty, "Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism," p. 7.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7. See John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. xxiii-xxiv, 85-86.

entirely with the idea of access to an independent world in favor of conceptual relativism, McDowell aims to replace this picture with an alternative conception of knowledge and experience that is answerable to the world. In this sense, a comparison can be drawn between McDowell and medieval realists such as Aquinas.

In his recent and influential monograph *Mind and World* he proposes to “diagnose” and offer a potential “cure” for some “characteristic anxieties of modern philosophy” concerning “the relation between mind and world.”<sup>88</sup> From the start, it is clear that he wishes to unravel the heritage of Cartesian dualism in modern philosophy. It is therefore most significant that, while continually acknowledging the centrality of Kant for his own views, McDowell wishes to undo what Donald Davidson has called the “third dogma of empiricism,” a “dualism of conceptual scheme and empirical content.”<sup>89</sup> He argues that this dualism is closely bound up with two poles in modern thought described as “The Myth of the Given” (radical empiricism) and “frictionless spinning in a void” (idealism) which, when combined, give rise to an antinomy.<sup>90</sup>

McDowell’s own favored solution for disposing of the antinomy between the empiricist and idealist tensions in modern thought, is especially interesting from the point of view of medieval realism. In order to dispose of the antinomy, he argues, we must reject both positions as illusory. The “empiricist” wants to privilege sensory experience as a tribunal for judgment, without allowing it to be infected by conceptual content. The “idealist” reacts by confining judgment to the sphere of reasons and insulating it thereby from answerability to the world. McDowell argues that we must regard sensible intuition itself as having conceptual content.<sup>91</sup> But, he also denies that this insulates knowledge from being a direct awareness of the world, such as it is:

Conceptual capacities . . . can be operative not only in judgments . . . but already in the transactions of nature that are constituted by the world’s impacts on the receptive capacities of a suitable subject. . . Impressions can be cases of its perceptually appearing—being apparent—to a subject that things are thus and so. In receiving impressions, a subject can be open to the way things manifestly are.”<sup>92</sup>

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xi.

<sup>89</sup> Donald Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” in Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 183–98, especially pp. 187–89. See also McDowell, *Mind and World*, pp. xvi, 3–4.

<sup>90</sup> Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” pp. xii ff., 11ff.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. ix.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xx.

This is a startling conclusion, for although it is open to a certain idealist interpretation, it would seem that McDowell is arguing for a form of direct realism that is hospitable to a realist epistemology of a Thomistic sort. That McDowell is adopting this sort of strategy, is further supported by his appeal to the Aristotelian concept of second nature in order to explain how it is possible that we experience the world as it really is, yet this experience already contains conceptual content. As he argues, human beings acquire certain conceptual capacities to discriminate and interpret features of the world.<sup>93</sup> The most appropriate model for these capacities is the Aristotelian conception of the acquisition of virtue and the enlightenment of our practical reasoning thereby.<sup>94</sup> Through the acquisition of virtues, practical reason becomes responsive to genuine requirements of reason that are independent of the moral agent. In the same way, McDowell argues we should regard understanding as becoming aware of independent intelligible aspects of reality that it previously was unable to discriminate through the acquisition of certain cognitive dispositions or a second nature.<sup>95</sup>

McDowell's conception of "answerability to the world" provides a very useful case in point for the present analysis, since he shares many sympathies with both the postmodern and pre-modern philosophical projects. With the postmoderns he shares the conclusion that the Cartesian epistemological turn and the poles of rationalism and empiricism to which it gave rise, have reached the end of the road. In answer to the failure of the modern project he does not propose skepticism, however, but a form of direct realism which borrows from the Aristotelian notion of virtue. Both aspects of this response offer a remarkable opening to the medieval intellectual project.

### *Virtue Epistemology*

Given this fact, it is worth noting briefly in closing that in addition to McDowell's turn to the virtues in order to alleviate the modern epistemological predicament, there are currently a number of new full scale theories of knowledge which utilize the concept of intellectual virtue. One such example is that of Linda Zagzebski's recent influential book *Virtues of the Mind*.<sup>96</sup> Several critical points of her approach are worth mentioning, since they signal a place for the spirit of medieval philosophy and constitute an answer to the loss of confidence in truth which John Paul II laments.

<sup>93</sup> McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. xx.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 78–79.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 79ff., xx–xxi.

<sup>96</sup> See Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind*.

Zagzebski fully agrees with the critique of the Cartesian turn in the account of knowledge, but she takes the point one step further.<sup>97</sup> The problem with the Cartesian legacy in epistemology, she argues, is much like that with modern rule-based ethical theories which neglect the character of the moral agent and focus almost exclusively upon the morality of individual acts. Modern epistemology, including the atomism of Descartes's own methodic doubt and procedure for justification, focuses almost exclusively upon individual beliefs and seeks the justifying conditions of those beliefs in the "phenomenological qualities of the mental state of believing itself."<sup>98</sup> Over against this proposal, Zagzebski argues that epistemology should focus primarily upon the character or intellectual virtues of the believer and hold that "knowledge is true belief grounded in epistemic virtue."<sup>99</sup> She further emphasizes that this calls for greater recognition of the social dimension of knowledge.<sup>100</sup>

Significantly, each of these features of the intellectual virtues provides an opening to the tradition of medieval Christian philosophy, a point which Zagzebski is well aware of. There are, of course, the obvious parallels between her use of the intellectual and moral virtues and their medieval counterparts. Indeed, she argues that special attention must be given to the revitalization of the virtues of understanding and wisdom once we get away from the conception of knowledge as merely piling up sets of individually justified beliefs.<sup>101</sup> But, perhaps most interesting for our present analysis, Zagzebski notes that emphasis upon the social dimension of knowledge fits especially well with the Catholic tradition's conception of the community as the locus of knowledge constituted by the deposit of faith.<sup>102</sup> In other words, not only our acquisition of moral and intellectual virtues depends upon the community, but often the content of belief depends upon the credible report of witnesses. This is true not only of religious faith, but of all types of "good believing."<sup>103</sup> It would seem that an inquiry into epistemology which focuses upon the intellectual virtues must therefore take account of what John Paul II has called "the truth of the person."

<sup>97</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>98</sup> Linda Zagzebski, "Religious Knowledge and the Virtues," p. 212.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.* p. 209.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215. See Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind*, pp. 43ff.

<sup>101</sup> Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind*, pp. 43ff.

<sup>102</sup> Zagzebski, *Rational Faith: Catholic Responses to Reformed Epistemology*, p. 208.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215.



## CONCLUSIONS

Acknowledgment of this possibility brings us full circle to the question: Can medieval philosophy offer constructive advice and even challenges to an ailing postmodern world? The answer to that question depends in turn upon whether faith can credibly come to the aid of reason and whether commitments to moderate realism and transcendent truth can be sustained. Postmodernism has mounted a vigorous critique of the sort of conception of rationality which would exclude faith *a priori*, but we have argued that it should be equally critical of the modern turn toward immanence and away from transcendence. Furthermore, along with the skeptical voices in the present climate, there are also more hopeful ones. If we come to see the interminable struggle between empiricism and rationalism as misguided, John McDowell argues, we can engage in a therapeutic project which avoids the mistakes of the Cartesian turn, but preserves the notion of mind's answerability to the world. This move is remarkably like Aquinas's response to his version of the Cartesian problem. He is prepared to admit that perceptual and intellectual error are distinct possibilities, but not prepared to grant that systematic deception is a viable epistemic viewpoint. As we have seen, for Aquinas this position is bound up with his view of the relation between reason and faith. Zagzebski's call for a turn to the intellectual virtues and the social dimension of knowledge signals an important opening to just this sort of move. Thus, it is clear that there is much constructive work for medieval philosophy to do.