Thomist Humanism, Realism, and Retrieving Philosophy in Our Time

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This paper is a Christian philosophical consideration of a complicated question about the nature of Thomist humanism, realism, and philosophy. In it I maintain that reasonable justification exists to predicate the term “humanism” of Thomism in two main senses in which professional philosophers today generally understand the term. As (1) a study of classical literary, artistic, and scientific works of Ancient Greece and Rome; (2) as a way of studying that places emphasis on the (a) centrality or dignity of the human person, (b) subjects of study that relate to such centrality or dignity, or (c) ways of engaging in such a study that give a special dignity to the human subject as agent doing the studying. I further maintain modern “philosophers,” including many Thomists, have largely lost our understanding of philosophy as rooted in sense reality, in principles of sense wonder. If we hope to retrieve philosophy and a sense of reality in our time, we must retrieve a proper understanding of the way in which philosophy and Thomism are humanisms essentially rooted in existential realism and sense wonder.

At the start of one of his classic works on metaphysics and art, Etienne Gilson claims, “The first question a philosopher should ask about paintings is their mode of existence.” The reason Gilson gives to explain why the first question a philosopher should ask about paintings is about their way of existing is the same reason any Thomist or sound philosopher should give about the first question a philosopher should ask about the nature of anything: “About what does not exist, there is nothing to say. About what does actually exist, the first point to be considered is the nature, or modality, of its existence.”

My present reflection is a Christian philosophical consideration of a complicated question about the nature of Thomist humanism, realism, and philosophy. As such, it should start by wondering about the sort of existence possessed by Thomist humanism, realism, and philosophy. To do this I must first distinguish different senses of the terms.

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We predicate these terms in many senses today. Starting with Thomist humanism, we have to distinguish different senses of “humanism” and “Thomism.”

Professional philosophers today generally understand the term “humanism” to signify (1) a study of classical literary, artistic, and scientific works of Ancient Greece and Rome. This is the sort of sense in which thinkers such as Paul Oskar Kristeller often use the term to refer to the humanism of the Italian Renaissance. Professional philosophers also use it to refer to (2) a way of studying that places emphasis on centrality or dignity of the human person, (3) on subjects of study that relate to such centrality or dignity, or (4) on ways of engaging in such a study that gives a special dignity to the human subject as agent doing the studying. Reasonable justification exists to predicate “humanism” of Thomism in all four major philosophical senses of the term. Thomist humanism has the existence of a wonder about classical wisdom and about subjects that relate to such centrality and dignity, as a way of studying such subjects, and of doing so that gives a special dignity to the agent studying.

In the first sense, just as the Italian Renaissance humanists who succeeded him, like many of his contemporaries of the French Renaissance of the high Middle Ages, St. Thomas engaged in a study of the classics to revive higher learning in his time. And like many later Renaissance humanists, St. Thomas studied classical writings for mainly theological aims designed to get truth from classical philosophical and theological works, especially from neo-Platonism, Aristotle, the Church Fathers, and St. Augustine, and build upon these truths to see further and deeper than classical authors had been able to see.

In the second, third, and fourth senses, Thomism is a humanism because it is a way of philosophizing within theology, what Thomists often call a “Christian philosophy.” As a Christian theology utilizing the classical mode of philosophizing that traces back to Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, and the pre-Socratics, Thomism emphasizes the centrality of the human person, the subjects its studies have a direct bearing on the centrality and dignity of the human person, and the way it studies these subjects increases the dignity of the philosophical act.

I have defended in detail elsewhere the thesis that Christian philosophy is essentially a way of philosophizing within theology. So, I will give no detailed defense of this view here. Instead, I will say in summary that I think, when leading Thomistic thinkers of the twentieth century such as Gilson and Jacques Maritain first started to articulate the notion of a Christian philosophy during the late 1920s and early 1930s, (1) they did not have a precise understanding of St. Thomas’s distinction between essence and existence, (2) they tended to think of philosophy as a system, or body, of knowledge, and (3) at least Gilson tended to conceive of the essence of Christian philosophy as an observable reality “for history alone,” not for philosophy or theology; that is, from the external standpoint of a historical observer, not from the internal standpoint of a practitioner.

This is so true that in giving an early articulation of his view of Christian philosophy in The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy, Gilson says:

Consider any given philosophic system. Now ask if it is “Christian,” and if so by what characteristics you can recognize it as such? From the observer’s standpoint it is a philosophy, therefore a work of reason. The author is a Christian and yet his Christianity, however telling its influence on his philosophy has been, remains essentially distinct from it. The only means at our disposal for detecting this inner action is to compare this data which we can outwardly observe: The philosophy without revelation and the philosophy with revelation. This is what I have attempted to do. And since history alone is capable of performing this task, I have stated that history alone can give meaning to the concept of Christian philosophy. . . . I may say then, that, Christian philosophy is an objectively observable reality for history alone, but that once its existence has been thus established, its notion may be analyzed in itself. This ought to be done as Mr. J. Maritain has done it; I am in fact in complete agreement with him. On the other hand, if . . . Christian philosophy is not a historically observable reality, or . . . the Christian character of philosophy is in no wise indebted to revelation, my position must be considered false.

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5 See Redpath, “Romance of Wisdom,” p. 100. Gilson’s The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy was based upon twenty Gifford lectures that Gilson gave at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, between 1931 and 1932. It was first published in French under the title L’esprit de la philosophie médiévale (Paris: J. Vrin, 1932), then in English, tr. A. H.
Clearly, when Gilson and Maritain started to talk about Christian philosophy early in their careers, they did so in systematic, essentialistic, and nominalistic terms, as if philosophy and revelation were bodies of knowledge, or logical or Avicennian absolute essences with abstract modes of existence to which we can be add and subtract. And Gilson consciously did so from a historical observer’s standpoint. Thomistically considered, several major problems exist with this understanding of Christian philosophy.

One is that, as Armand A. Maurer has conclusively proven, properly speaking, St. Thomas considered philosophy to be a human operation, the act of a human habit or *habitus*. He did not primarily think of philosophy as a system or body of knowledge. Maurer traces the origin of the notion that philosophy is a system or body of knowledge to William of Ockham and his nominalistic descendents.6

A second problem is that another, and better, way exists, apart from the historical observer’s standpoint, to recognize the existence and nature of Christian philosophy: the standpoint of the Christian philosophical practitioner. When we take this standpoint, we immediately start to realize that the mode of existence of Christian philosophy, like all philosophy, is that of proper human action upon proper philosophical subjects, not that of an abstractly considered system.

As St. Thomas tells us, philosophy studies a real, not a logical, subject or genus, a proximate subject, or generic substance. While this subject resembles a logical genus because we include it in the definition of beings that participate in it (its intrinsic, or *per se* accidents), strictly speaking, this subject genus is a substance considered as the proper subject of intrinsic, necessary operations, or *per se* accidents. The philosopher’s job is to reflect chiefly upon this proximate, first, and chief, subject and upon its intrinsic and necessary, or *per se*, accidents, a hierarchical order of species, contrary opposites, that flow from it.


For example, following Aristotle, St. Thomas tells us that the proximate subject, or generic substance, about which the geometrician wonders is the surface body, the body that is the immediate, chief, proximate, and principle subject of all plane figures, its intrinsic and necessary, or per se, accidents. These plane figures constitute a multitude of beings, of hierarchically ordered opposites, or species (a many) subjectified in a surface body and essentially flow from it as from a principle (a one). Since this is the body that proximately gives rise to these necessary and intrinsic accidents, it is their per se or proper subject and they are its per se, or proper, accidents (much in the same way that Socrates the musician, not Socrates the philosopher, or Socrates the human being, is the proper and per se principle, cause, and subject of flute playing, which is his proper or per se accident). This is the body (subject, matter, or genus, or generic substance) upon which the geometrician is supposed primarily to reflect, for the purpose of considering how the principles of this subject give rise to its different species, or per se accidents.7

In a similar fashion, we could say that the subject the medical doctor studies is the relatively healthy human body, the human body as the subject of extreme differences, contrary opposites, of different species of human health and disease because the proximate subject or principle of health and disease is not the substantial body, or surface body, but the living, sentient, human body. Or, we could say that the subject the ethicist studies is the moral body, that is, the free human subject, which is the principle of the moral species of actions that proceed from human choice, the contrary opposites consisting of moral virtue and vice.

What I am saying is to true that when St. Thomas starts his consideration of moral activity in the first part of the second part of his Summa theologiae, the intrinsic principles of moral activity to which he refers in the first 89 questions are totally related to the human subject in which we find the faculties of human, or moral, action: rationality, appetition, and deliberate choice. He does so precisely because these faculties are the proximate, per se, intrinsic, and chief principles and causes of moral activity. Hence, after examining these intrinsic principles of moral action for hundreds of pages, in his preface to Question 90, Article 1, to explain the total cause of moral behavior, St. Thomas says that he will now consider the exterior principles of human action. He then mentions these two main principles as God and the devil! And it is within this context of measures coming to us from an exterior principle that he considers species of law as moral principles.

In its mode of existence as a habit, as an essential, per se, or intrinsic accident, philosophy exists in an ancillary state in a Christian’s soul. Hence:

The ancillary relation that the act of a philosophical habit always has within the Christian soul is an essential part of its being, not an accidental condition of its relative state. Christian philosophy considered in its absolute, or pure, state is philosophizing ordered to, and imbedded with, faith’s grace. Philosophy does not exist as the act of a habit in the Christian soul like mathematics exists within military science. Military science does not give the mathematician answers or hints to the questions that the mathematician seeks to answer. Nor does military science enter into the mathematical habit, infuse it with intelligible light, and intensify its activity’s precision. Supernatural faith does all these things within the philosophical habit of the Christian philosopher.

Despite this ancillary state, existing as a philosophical habit, and intrinsic accident, within the faith-filled intellect of a Christian believer, philosophy exists in a more dignified state than it does as a body of knowledge abstractly viewed. In the Christian philosopher, just as in the Ancient philosopher, philosophy exists as a principle of wisdom, but it exists in the higher state of faith-filled wisdom. Hence, just as the faculty of sight exists with greater excellence (hence, dignity) in human beings than it does in irrational animals so the philosophical habit infused by grace exists in the Christian soul in a more elevated state than it does in the soul of a non-believer.

Philosophy begins in wonder, not in universal methodic doubt or impossible dreams of pure reason. Aristotle tells us that our natural human desire to wonder about the world around us, to escape from ignorance and become wise, is the ultimate source of the genesis philosophy. Such being the case, in some sense, the human person must be one of the first principles of philosophy. St. Thomas adds to this observation that wonder is a species of fear that results from ignorance of a cause. Since the object of fear calls to mind a difficulty of some magnitude and a sense of personal weakness, according to an ontological exigency of ends, the desire to philosophize must arise within all human beings as the product of a natural desire to escape from the natural fear we have of the real difficulty, danger, and damage ignorance can cause us.

St. Thomas maintains that this initial sense of fear grips us in two stages. Initially, recognition of our weakness and fear of failure causes us to refrain from passing judgment in the immediate present. Then hope of the possibility of understanding the cause of an occurrence prompts us to philosophical investigation. Thomas adds that, since philosophical investigation starts with wonder, “it must end in the contrary of this.” Hence, geometricians do not

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wonder about the answer to questions they already know, or about what is evident. And philosophers do not seek to remain in a state of wonder. They seek to put wonder to rest by discovering the causes of the occurrences of things.\(^9\)

Undoubtedly, then, wonder is the first principle of all philosophy, be it theoretical, practical, or productive for everyone and for all time. This means that, initially, all philosophical first principles arise from the human senses and human emotion. This does not mean, however, that, as Protagoras would claim, “man is the measure of all things,” including philosophical principles. Philosophical principles proceed partly from the side of human faculties and partly from the side of reality, or mind-independent being.

For this reason Aristotle tells us that thinkers like Protagoras “say nothing…while they appear to say something remarkable, when they say ‘man is the measure of all things.’”\(^10\) And St. Thomas tells us that, in the case of the speculative sciences of physics, mathematics, and metaphysics, we derive the formal object of such sciences “according to differences between objects of speculation,” which we derive partly “from the side of the power of the intellect” and partly “from the side of the habit of science that perfects the intellect.”

Because all three sciences are speculative, they must involve the human intellect in their operation of simply wondering about occurrences flowing from a proximate subject in the hope of simply of knowing the per se principles of these occurrences. Hence, from the side of the power of the intellect, we derive a formal object that essentially activates our intellects as operating speculatively, not practically. Our scientific habits are speculative precisely because they conform to the ontological exigencies of the human intellect aiming at thinking speculatively. Since our intellects are immaterial faculties, immaterial being, being removed from the identity conditions of matter and motion, essentially activates them, St. Thomas tells us that one of the necessary identity conditions of the formal object of speculative science is that it be a proximate subject immaterially, or abstractly, considered. In short, what makes our thinking speculative is that we think about an abstractly considered proximate subject simply as such.

Because all three sciences are habits, or qualities, inhering in our intellectual faculty, St. Thomas tells us that all principles that give them

\(^9\) Ibid., Bk. 1, 1, 980a1–982a1. Aquinas, Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle, Bk 1, l. 3, n. 66; Summa theologiae, 1-2, 41, 4, ad 5.

\(^10\) Aristotle, Metaphysics, Bk. 10, 1, 1053a32–1053b3.
specifically scientific ways of existing, that is necessity, must activate them. Necessity is the mark of science. Science is thinking about what must be. Hence, what makes our speculative way of thinking scientific is that we possess our immaterial, speculative habit of thinking in relation to consideration of necessary, not contingent or incidental, relations to a proximate subject. We can think speculatively about what is not a subject of science (something contingent, what need not be or can be in more than one way, or what is incidental to a proximate subject), and we can think scientifically about what is not a subject of speculation (an subject of productive science). What makes a subject of speculation a scientific subject is that our habit of knowing reacts to some necessary relation in the speculatively-considered subject: that something in this subject is a one and unchangeable principle upon which something else proximately and necessarily depends. Hence, St. Thomas tells us that we differentiate the speculative sciences according to the degree to which our different intellectual habits operate in separation from, or connection with, matter and motion.\footnote{St. Thomas Aquinas, \textit{Commentary on the de Trinitate of Boethius, Questions V and VI}. \textit{St. Thomas Aquinas: The Division and Methods of the Sciences}, q. 5, a. 1, Reply
\footnote{Ibid., Reply to 4.}}

Furthermore, he adds that we use different methods of doing this in different sciences. He says that we take the methods of the sciences “from the powers of the soul” because these powers operate in different ways. And we determine how our powers operate by relating them to their formal objects. Hence, we take the methods of the sciences from the different formal objects, or identity conditions, that determine a proximate subject to be one and unchanging, in this way, not that way.\footnote{Ibid., Reply to 4.} Hence, the mathematician’s proximate subject is quantified material being, the surface body, the ancient physicist’s proximate subject is a qualified surface body, and the metaphysician studies substantial being that can be material or immaterial.

Scientifically, we proceed in this way because we derive scientific principles partly from the natural constitution of our faculties and partly from the way things exist according to mind-independent relations. Scientifically, we think the way we can (according to the way our powers operate in relation to different formal objects), not the way we wish. The being of things and the way this essentially relates to our natural faculties, not our dreams, determines the methods by which we can think about objects at all or scientifically. The being of things and the natural constitution of our knowing powers, not our dreams, provide the unity and necessity that grounds all knowledge and science.
By ignoring the reality that science is principally a habit of mind, not a system, or body of knowledge, and that the being of things constitutes part of philosophy’s life-blood, modern “philosophers,” including many Thomists, have largely lost our understanding of philosophy as rooted in reality, in principles of sense wonder. If we hope to retrieve philosophy and a sense of reality in our time, we have to respect the necessity that flows from diverse identity conditions existing in things independently of the human mind and from the mind itself. (These identity conditions, not human wishes, ultimately determine whether how we wish to think philosophically is realizable according to the ontological priority ends that exist in us and in the world.\textsuperscript{13}) To do this we must retrieve a proper understanding of the way in which philosophy and Thomism are humanisms essentially rooted in existential realism and sense wonder. And failure to do so will cause us to continue the modern error of confounding philosophy with fantasy and will lead to an even further erosion of the Western respect of wonder in the universe and ourselves.