Featured Article

Fides et Ratio and the Evolution of the Thomistic Philosophic Tradition[1]

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Abstract: Twenty-five years after publication, *Fides et Ratio* remains the most definitive pontifical pronouncement on the state and direction of Catholic philosophy. One may consider it as an updated Thomist manifesto given its explicit endorsement of St. Thomas Aquinas' mind as the paradigm par excellence of the harmony between faith and reason. As an intellectual tradition, however, Thomism is not immune to change and over the years, Thomist scholars continuously attempt to re-read and re-interpret St. Thomas' thought vis-a-vis other philosophic worldviews. Such engagement though cannot proceed without engendering new crises or tensions. The outcome resulting from these philosophic experimentations was once described by Alasdair MacIntyre as the emergence of "too many Thomisms" in reference to the multiplicity of philosophic strands all vying to be the authentic expression of St. Thomas Aquinas' philosophic heritage. What I propose to do in this paper is to examine the critical implications of MacIntyre's remarks against the background of *Fides et Ratio*'s consolidation of Catholic philosophic tradition and its recognition of St. Thomas Aquinas' exemplary articulation of the unity between faith and reason. My discussion is guided by the question: Is a plural Thomism compatible with the philosophic vision of *Fides et Ratio*?

Keywords: Thomism, *Fides et Ratio*, Aquinas, Catholic philosophy

In his book, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre called his readers' attention to the phenomenon of "too many Thomisms" in reference to an apparent domestic problem among the adherents of the Thomist philosophic tradition.[2] MacIntyre's critique was an

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[1] Written in commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the encyclical, *Fides et Ratio* (14 September 1998) by Pope Saint John Paul II.

emphatic addendum to the same observation shared by other Thomist scholars like Gery Provoust, Gerald McCool, Fergus Kerr, and John Knasas. The suggestion offered was that a plural Thomism tended to undermine the aim of Leo XIII's *Aeterni Patris* to establish a consolidated front against the vigorous offensive of modernity. At first glance, the whole affair may seem like a mere instance of internal squabble until one reckons that a plural Thomism can indeed have an impact on the general direction of Catholic philosophic tradition vis-a-vis the global intellectual landscape invariably described as post-modern, post-metaphysical, post-Christian or even post-theological.[3] Regardless of one's descriptive preference, it is undeniable that the current intellectual environment has significantly diminished the place of either divinity or theological thought in the public sphere. This diminution or decentering of the *sacred* is what marks the "secular age," according to Charles Taylor. Although Taylor conceded that the secular age has not completely displaced either God or religion, neither of them, nonetheless, can no longer reserve to itself the former primacy it used to enjoy.[4] How can a splintered Thomism face up to this challenge? And if ever it could, how can a bundle of responses coming from multiple directions be as efficacious as a counteroffensive launched from a united front? At face value, it would seem that the current plurality of Thomism confirms *Fides et Ratio*'s pronouncement that the Catholic Church has no philosophy of its own.[5] If such were the case, then the phenomenon of "too many Thomisms" poses no threat to Catholic philosophy and may in fact be seen as the real destiny of Catholic philosophic thinking. This is a rather convenient conclusion but one that requires further refinement to make sense of its fuller philosophic impact. The problem, it appears, is not so much the number of ways one may read St. Thomas Aquinas but whether this kind of multiplicity reduces, in any way, Thomism's potency to remain consonant with *Fides et Ratio*'s championing of the unity between faith and reason. Seen this way, the plurality of Thomism may be read no longer as an intramural of sort but as a problematic that discloses the continuities and

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[2] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 58–81.

[3] Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 41–56.

[4] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007), 505–535.

[5] John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, Encyclical on the Relationship between Faith and Reason (Vatican City: Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1998), 49, <https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html>.

discontinuities within the Thomist tradition in relation to the larger milieu of philosophic discourse.

A Question of Legacy

At the outset of this segment, I shall use the term "Thomism" in its most generic sense, that is, as a scholarly tradition that promotes a re-constructive critical engagement of the intellectual legacy of St. Thomas Aquinas. As it appears, this definition is quite loose but specific enough to include theorists belonging to that early age when Thomism has yet to take its present shape and at the same time, cautious enough to exclude other figures who might have read St. Thomas but for reasons contrary to the basic core of his philosophic or theological positions. This is the reason why personages like Bishop Stephen Tempier or Robert Kilwarby may be reckoned as readers of St. Thomas Aquinas but may not be identified as Thomists.[6]

It is likewise worth noting that in its medieval context, philosophy is contiguous with theology. While St. Thomas Aquinas himself made an effort to delineate the two, it can hardly be denied that in actual practice, the two disciplines appealed to the same set of grammar and vocabulary although they diverged in what medieval scholars called their *terminus a quo* or point of origin. This should help clarify why Thomism, before it became a philosophic school of thought, was actually a campaign to restore St. Thomas' ideas to their original theological contexts. The early Thomists were, in fact, theologians committed to unknotting St. Thomas Aquinas' doctrinal entanglements as shown by the charges of errors heaped upon him by those who didn't share his mind. As a philosopher, St. Thomas leaned towards Aristotle but unlike Aristotle, he thought knowledge could be gained, besides the mind's reliance on sense experience, via receptivity to divine revelation. On this matter, St. Thomas was in league with thinkers from non-Christian traditions like Avicenna and Moses Maimonides and opposite the likes of Averroist Aristotelians like Siger of Brabant and Boethius of Dacia. As a theologian, St. Thomas was committed to the so-called three tasks of the medieval master of theology, namely, *docere, praedicare, disputare* or lecturing, preaching, and disputing the content of divine revelation via a healthy dose of rational discourse within the framework of *fides quaerens intellectum* or faith seeking understanding that

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[6] For a brief, yet substantive account of the history of Thomism, see Romanus Cessario, OP, *A Brief History of Thomism* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 2003).

was championed by St. Augustine and St. Anselm.[7] This benign recognition of the role of reason in theological discourse was what set St. Thomas Aquinas apart from other medieval scholars like St. Bonaventure, Duns Scotus and even Meister Eckhart.[8]

Another important detail worthy of consideration pertains to the unique relation between Thomism and St. Thomas Aquinas himself. The average perception looks up to St. Thomas Aquinas as the progenitor of Thomism and regards the link between the two as the backbone of Catholic philosophy. This view however, as mentioned earlier, has been challenged by *Fides et Ratio* where John Paul II asserted that the Catholic church has no philosophy of its own nor does it seek to espouse a specific philosophic system. In the same encyclical, John Paul II likewise recognized St. Thomas Aquinas, not so much for this philosophic speculation but for his theological mind.[9] It can perhaps be safely maintained that the tie that binds St. Thomas Aquinas with the splintered versions of Thomism is more nominal than doctrinal and a lot less historical. One may remember that St. Thomas Aquinas was a medieval thinker whereas the earliest form of what we, in retrospect, label Thomism was, in effect, a modern outgrowth.[10] Yes, it is possible to trace the intellectual stimulus behind the latter to the former but to consider it as the brainchild of our friar scholar might already be stretching it too far. Unlike a Plato or an Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas was not someone who intentionally gathered disciples around his school of thought, much less, his personality. He also did not cultivate or attract a hefty following during his lifetime and while scholars did pore over his works after his death, their outputs might be seen more as an apology under duress (given the accusations of heterodoxy against him) rather than a conscious campaign to perpetuate his intellectual legacy. During his active days as a medieval scholar, St. Thomas Aquinas did enjoy a certain level of fame and influence as attested by the letters and manuscripts solicited by people from all walks of life—popes, monarchs, bishops, fellow friars, politicians, students—who sought his intervention in their respective predicaments.[11] Notwithstanding such positive influence, St. Thomas never

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[7] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Inaugural Lectures: Commendation and Division of Sacred Scripture*, trans. by Ralph McInerny in *Thomas Aquinas, Selected Writings* (London: Penguin, 1998), rev. by Joseph Kenny, O.P., <https://isidore.co/aquinas/Principium.htm>.

[8] Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), 31–60, 92–121.

[9] John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio,* 43.

[10] See Victor B. Brezik, CSB, (Ed.) *One Hundred Years of Thomism: Aeterni Patris and Afterwards, A Symposium* (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1981).

[11] For a complete list of St. Thomas Aquinas' works online, see Joseph Kenny, O.P., ed., *St. Thomas Aquinas's Works in English* <https://isidore.co/aquinas/>.

ran out of detractors who preferred to impute error or malice even in his most earnest efforts of truth-seeking. Most of these "haters" came from the ranks of secular clerics, fellow professors at the Faculty of Theology or counterparts at the Faculty of Arts. One may remember that St. Thomas Aquinas' appointment as a master of theology at the University of Paris was met with strong resistance from the secular masters. And even when he was already serving his tenure, his name was always associated with rumors of loose scholarship from his colleagues at the Faculty of Theology (due to his forays into Aristotelian philosophy) and from professors at the Faculty of Arts (given his known reservation for the primacy of divine revelation). From various corners, in other words, the prevailing opinion saw St. Thomas as a misfit. This adverse situation came to a head in 1277 when, three years after St. Thomas' death, Bishop Stephen Tempier condemned his teachings along with those of others, due to their perceived Aristotelian compromises. While the condemnation based itself on a misreading rather than a fair critical assessment of St. Thomas' works, it was an episode worthy of mention given its foundational role in shaping the early formation and reception of St. Thomas' intellectual patrimony. It is not without a tinge of irony that the master celebrated now as a paragon of orthodoxy was once considered an outlier from his own domain. It became then the self-appointed task of the first wave of Thomists to rehabilitate the works of their master by disclosing the cogency of his theological insights beneath the trappings of Aristotelian philosophy.

From Thomism to St. Thomas Aquinas

Given the above, one may say that Thomism, in its early beginnings, was constituted mainly by curative efforts to sanitize St. Thomas Aquinas' alleged tarnished memory. The well-respected Thomist commentator Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange referred to this episode as the age of the "defensiones" or apologists.[12] This is yet another interesting feature of St. Thomas' intellectual history. The preponderance of cases of misreading and, alongside it, the expressed need for a posthumous clinical treatment of his works clearly indicates the telling absence, on St. Thomas' part, of a self-conscious attempt to perpetuate an intellectual tradition within a neatly established theological or philosophic system. Such monumental project would have required a handful of dedicated collaborators who could comment, critique, consolidate and propagate his

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[12] Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, quoted by Roman Cessario, *A Brief History of Thomism*, 28.

corpus of works. Unfortunately for St. Thomas, he didn't enjoy that privilege. His closest associate, who was likewise his secretary and confessor, Reginald of Piperno, did have access to his master's writings but was more pre-occupied with other friar duties rather than developing his own commentaries on St. Thomas' oeuvre.[13] The next person most qualified and most capable to do so would have been St. Albert the Great but by the time of St. Thomas' death, St. Albert was already too advanced in age although it was recorded that, despite his frail health and against the wishes of his fellow friars, he did travel to Paris to defend his beloved student upon learning about the allegations of heresy hurled against the latter.[14] The other potential collaborators would have been Henry of Ghent and Giles of Rome, two of the most influential theologians in the last quarter of the thirteenth century. Henry of Ghent, however, didn't share St. Thomas' fascination with Aristotle. He was, in fact, against St. Thomas' Aristotelian stance as shown by his active participation in the censorship campaign that led to the inclusion of St. Thomas in the 1277 condemnation.[15] Giles of Rome did maintain certain intellectual affinity with St. Thomas Aquinas but opted to develop his own scholarly interests rather than follow the footsteps of his former professor.[16] The two other most likely pioneer proponents of Thomism would have been Hannibal de Hannibaldis and Romanus of Rome, St. Thomas' successors as Chair of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Paris. They would have welcomed the task of cultivating Thomistic thought had they not died much earlier than St. Thomas Aquinas himself. Hannibal died in 1272; Romanus in 1273. St. Thomas would have his time a year later, that is, 1274.[17]

Thomism was born, in other words, with neither a parent nor an heir. The earliest form of Thomism, if we can call it such, was born almost at the threshold of modernity and this, as has been suggested earlier, has the primary mission of cleansing the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas from their perceived Aristotelian contaminants. St. Thomas' close dependence on Aristotelian thought made him a prime target of bitter criticism from the theologians of Paris and Oxford. Even the Franciscan order itself was

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[13] Jean-Pierre Torrell, OP, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: Volume 1, His Person and Hi Work*, trans. by Robert Royal (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 2005), 272–275.

[14] Simon Tugwell, OP, *Albert & Thomas: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 25–26.

[15] John Marenbon, *Medieval Philosophy, Routledge History of Philosophy, Volume III* (London: Routledge, 1998), 291–293.

[16] Armand A. Maurer, CSB, *Medieval Philosophy: An Introduction, Second Edition* (Ontario: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1982), 204–213, 350.

[17] Cessario, *A Brief History of Thomism*, 40.

vehemently opposed to St. Thomas' appropriation of the pagan Greek philosopher. In fact, in a General Chapter of 1282, the so-called friars minor forbade the use of *Summa Theologiae* in all of the Franciscan learning institutions.[18] What became the pressing task then of the early Thomists was the rehabilitation of the teachings of the Dominican magister and the defensive campaign against their fierce opponents. In a way, one can say that the initial shape of Thomism was a redacted version of St. Thomas' thought. It was not, in other words, a set of doctrines handed down via a seamless transmission but one that resulted from a series of reconstruction aimed at restoring St. Thomas Aquinas' orthodoxy. At the heart of these reconstructive attempts was the question concerning the viability of St. Thomas' tapping of Aristotle to buttress the conceptual scaffolding of his version of *fides et ratio* intersection. In other words, granted that theology requires an interface between faith and reason, it begs one to ask whether reason should be restricted to Aristotle's notion and demonstration of such. Is there a way of demonstrating the reasonability of faith without necessarily exposing it to the potential threats of Aristotelian doctrines that directly opposed the foundational claims of Catholic theology?

It does seem that when one talks of Thomism, one cannot summarily claim it to be St. Thomas' mind in its purest in as much as, historically, and theoretically, the two are distinguishable from one another. Were such purity readily accessible, the proto-Thomists as narrated above would not have devoted huge efforts to rehabilitate St. Thomas from his own complicity with his pagan interlocutor, Aristotle. The next stage of the evolution of Thomism would take place at the height of the modern period, specifically, in the 16th to 19th centuries, when Aristotle and his vaunted system were sidelined and rendered outmoded by the emerging sciences. While the early Thomists strived to merely minimize the Aristotelian undertones in St. Thomas' writings, modern Catholic thinkers would confront the challenge of discoursing about faith *against* the debilitating effects of Aristotelian metaphysics.[19] Actually, the question was a lot larger than St. Thomas Aquinas himself; what was, in fact, at stake was the fate of the version of *fides et ratio* unity which relied on the foundation of Aristotelian philosophy. Can such unity continue to find acceptance in a world that has turned its back on both Aristotle and his metaphysical legacy?

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[18] Marenbon, *Medieval Philosophy*, 296.

[19] See Alasdair MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophic Tradition* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009), 131–143.

Against the background of this quandary, the Catholic magisterial preference remained on the side of St. Thomas Aquinas. In 1567, via the papal bull *Mirabilis Deus*, Pope Pius V declared St. Thomas a Doctor of the Church and established his feast day in the same level of significance as that of the four other great doctors of the Church, namely, Saints Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome and Gregory. The same reverence for St. Thomas was likewise shown by the Council of Trent which, in its sessions between 1545 and 1563, had ordered the *Summa Theologiae* displayed at the altar alongside the Sacred Scriptures. The influence of St. Thomas could likewise be gleaned in Vatican I's document *Dei Filius* (1869-70), specifically in its discussion of the complementary interaction between faith and reason. This ecclesiastical preference for St. Thomas Aquinas would be capped in 1879 with Leo XIII's *Aeterni Patris* which served as the launching pad of the grand revival of Thomistic scholarship. In the popes' mind, St. Thomas Aquinas was the pill they thought the Church needed against the deleterious effects of modernity. They were reliant on the efforts of the Thomists who, ironically, in those days, that is, the 16th and 19th centuries, were busy debating as to which among their brands of Thomism was better. In a sense, these skirmishes do tell us why it is necessary to keep in mind the crucial distinction between Thomism and St. Thomas Aquinas. The former is a tradition in transit; the latter is the tradition's intellectual wellspring. What seemed to detract then from the gains of the modern renewal of Thomism was not so much the fact that it became plural; it was rather the assumption that such plurality was a drawback on the cogency of both the Thomist tradition and its source, St. Thomas Aquinas himself. Against this view, one may remember that modernity is a dispersed phenomenon and against it, a monolithic Thomism will prove to be counter-effective. Apparently, plurality does belong to the destiny of Thomism given modernity's multiple facets; a plural Thomism, however, would be a weak resort unless it stays close to the original spirit of its founding inspiration, St. Thomas Aquinas himself.

St. Thomas Aquinas and Philosophy

It was Leo XIII, in his *Aeterni Patris*, who inaugurated the call for a return to the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas in modern times.[20] The same appeal was repeated more than a century later by John Paul II in his *Fides et*

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[20] Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris*, Encyclical on the Restoration of Christian Philosophy (Vatican City: Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1879), 25 <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_04081879_aeterni-patris.html>.

Ratio.[21] However, what John Paul II did that Leo XIII didn't was to make official the Church's withholding of an endorsement of a particular philosophic system, not even St. Thomas' own. One may perceive in this stance John Paul II's own acknowledgement of the equivocal relationship between St. Thomas Aquinas and Thomism as well as his openness to the multiplicity of philosophic notions and practices within the ambit of the interaction between faith and reason.[22] In fact, in one part of the encyclical, John Paul II did recognize the contributions of a host of other philosophers to the promotion of Catholic thought.[23] Another significant matter that John Paul II raised in the encyclical was the non-intervention of the Church in matters involving philosophic questions.[24] The only time that the Church would make its case, according to John Paul II, was when a specific philosophic standpoint impinges on doctrinal issues related to faith and morals. Despite the disclaimer, one can detect some degree of ambiguity in the overall tenor of the encyclical. On one hand, it seems *Fides et Ratio* is suggesting that the relationship between Catholic faith and philosophy (e.g., Aristotelian metaphysics) is fundamentally secured while, on the other hand, it makes it seem that such relation is flexible and open-ended. Does the encyclical indeed harbor such ambiguity? A century before John Paul II issued his encyclical, that is, around the time of *Aeterni Patris*' promulgation, Catholic theologians of countries like Germany, France, Italy and Netherlands had ventured to do their theological explorations via the philosophic routes that once were dominated by Aristotle and now, charted by the likes of Descartes and Kant.[25] This is an important juncture in the history of Catholic thought as we see on one end, nineteenth-century neo-Scholastics and on the other, the advocates of the so-called "new theology," entangled in a bitter tug-of-war. Catholic theologians themselves, in other words, were divided between those who preferred to stick to the realism of St. Thomas and Aristotle and those who were adventurous enough to marry Thomism with the transcendental epistemology of Kant.[26] The charge that *Aeterni Patris* had resulted to "too many Thomisms" was based on the notion that it was the encyclical that set the favorable condition for the flourishing of the so-called transcendental Thomism, which for its critics,

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[21] John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 43.

[22] *Ibid.*, 72–74.

[23] *Ibid.*, 74.

[24] *Ibid.*, 49.

[25] Robert Royal, *A Deeper Vision: The Catholic Intellectual Tradition in the Twentieth Century* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015), 36–37.

[26] Gerald A. McCool, SJ, *Nineteenth-Century Scholasticism: The Search for a Unitary Method* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989), 17–36.

was merely a code for Thomism sleeping with the enemy.[27] Seen from this context, it would appear that the plurality of Thomism was not so much a numerical problem but a crisis of division incited by the question of keeping or abandoning the conventions of Thomist realist position. The crisis would drag on until the turn of the twentieth century. By the time of the 1930's, the debates would continue to rage, this time, involving continental thinkers who were arguing about the legitimacy of Christian philosophy in the face of new problems posed by the philosophy of Henri Bergson, existentialism, Marxism, and phenomenology among others. Thinkers like Emile Bruhier, Xavier Leon and Maurice Blondel were dismissive of Christian philosophy. Etienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain and Gabriel Marcel thought otherwise.[28] The debates actually stemmed from Xavier Leon's proposal to Etienne Gilson for a dialogue to determine the status of Thomism as a philosophy.[29] The idea to extend it to a debate on the general status of Christian philosophy came from Etienne Gilson.[30] The opposition of certain sectors against Thomism as a philosophy was one of the adverse reactions generated by Leo XIII's *Aeterni Patris*. The antagonism was deeply felt by the French intelligentsia who viewed the pontiff's move as another attempt to proselytize the European intellectual culture. The "Thomism" targeted by the critics was its generic version espoused by *Aeterni Patris* but they were also eyeing a specific strand of Thomism, the kind that rubbed elbows with Kant as exhibited by the writings of Desire Joseph Mercier and Joseph Marechal.[31] There is some ground that warrants the dismissal of Thomism as philosophy as there is another to dispute it. True, Thomism may not be considered a *philosophy* if we adhere strictly to the original intent of St. Thomas' medieval project. Back then, it was clear to his mind that what he was doing was not *philosophy* nor did he consider himself a philosopher in its medieval or even modern sense. And yet, regardless of this distinction, it

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[27] Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 17–21.

[28] For an account of the debates on Christian philosophy, see Greg Sadler, "Christian Philosophy: The 1930s French Debates," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (n.d.), <https://iep.utm.edu/christian-philosophy-1930s-french-debate/>. See also Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy (Gifford Lectures, 1931-1932)* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940); Jacques Maritain, *An Essay on Christian Philosophy* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955); and Maurice Blondel, *Philosophical Exigencies of Christian Religion* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021).

[29] See also Greg B. Sadler, "The 1930s Christian Philosophy Debates," in *Acta Philosophica*, II, 21 (2012), 393–406, <https://ojs-aphil.pusc.it/article/view/3880/2023>.

[30] Gerard Sadler, *Reason Fulfilled by Revelation: The 1930s Christian Philosophy Debates in France* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2019), 40.

[31] Gerald A. McCool, SJ, *From Unity to Pluralism: The Internal Evolution of Thomism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992), 32–33, 87–113.

can hardly be argued that St. Thomas works did not have adequate philosophic merit. It would be extremely difficult to subscribe to the opinion that Thomism loses its claim to being philosophical because of its inclusive association with faith.[32] This view, besides being arbitrary, is rather selective and drastically detached from the wide expanse of the history of philosophy. Readers may count Etienne Gilson's *The Spirit of Thomism*[33] and *Being and Some Philosophers*[34] as well as Jacques Maritain's *Bergsonian Philosophy and Thomism*[35] and *The Degrees of Knowledge*[36] as some of the best and most definitive responses against those who opposed Thomism's philosophic status. What Gilson and Maritain attempted to do in their respective endeavors was to disclose the rigorous and coherent philosophic character of Thomism without diluting its integration with faith and its theoretical mooring on realism. In effect, Gilson and Maritain were arguing that Thomism cannot simply be converted into another theory of knowledge at the expense of its realist commitment. Such realist commitment may be interpreted differently from the way Gilson and Maritain did, but it could not be abandoned without losing its ties with St. Thomas Aquinas and the traditional understanding of the unity between faith and reason. John Paul II did not explicitly claim it in his *Fides et Ratio* but it is not difficult to see how realism was valued by the encyclical as the philosophic guarantor of faith and reason interface. This special valuation of realism was such not because it was issued from Aristotle but because it sat well with the whole economy of revelation. With realism, one becomes more keenly aware of existence as the most primordial gift, bestowed by the creative generosity of God in the very mystery of his givenness. The starting point will always be the acknowledgement that one has been given so as to relish the experience of givenness itself. The articulation of this phenomenon of "gift" requires both the testimony of the deposit of human wisdom (reason) as well as the assent to the self-disclosure of God in the

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[32] Bertrand Russell infamously claimed: "There is little of the true philosophic spirit in Aquinas. He does not, like the Platonic Socrates, set out to follow wherever the argument may lead. He is not engaged in an inquiry, the result of which it is impossible to know in advance. Before he begins to philosophize, he already knows the truth; it is declared in the Catholic faith." See Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd. 1961), 463.

[33] See Etienne Gilson, *Thomism: The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2002).

[34] See Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1952).

[35] See Jacques Maritain, *Bergsonian Philosophy and Thomism* (Notre Dame, In.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1955).

[36] See Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge* (London: The Centenary Press, 1937).

unfolding of history (faith). The best synthesis of this inter-relation between faith and reason, for John Paul II and all his predecessors, can be found in no less than St. Thomas Aquinas.

St. Thomas Aquinas on Faith and Reason

St. Thomas was an astute reader of Aristotle proven no less by the commentaries he wrote on almost all the known works of the Greek philosopher during the last decade of his life. The extent of Aristotle's influence on our Dominican friar was unmistakable but there were also significant points of deviation between the two. In other words, St. Thomas did follow Aristotle closely, but he did not do so blindly.[37] The common perception then that St. Thomas merely baptized Aristotle is not just a caricature but a gross misrepresentation as well of the dialogical relationship between them.[38] Specifically, St. Thomas was reliant on Aristotle's version of realism which was actually central to the ancient Greek philosophic tradition. Due to their proclivity to understand the workings of nature, the Greeks, from the pre-Socratics down to the classical age, were wont to treat what was given, what was out there, as a starting point of their theoretical explorations. A variant of this tradition was Plato whose version of realism had him turn to the world of *forms* as his philosophic takeoff point. Plato undervalued the natural world and reckoned that, since it was subject to change, it had nothing of epistemic value to offer. Anything that partakes of change was beneath the prominence of thought; only what was changeless and eternal was worthy of thinking, and this was precisely the warrant that lends *form* its preeminence.

As in the image immortalized by Raphael in his fresco *The School of Athens*, Aristotle reversed the position of Plato by locating the *form* in the world of nature and integrating it within the domain of change. Like Plato, Aristotle acknowledged the role of *form* in thinking but unlike Plato,

[37] Leo J. Elders, *Thomas Aquinas and his Predecessors: The Philosophers and the Church Fathers in his Works* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2018), 20–66.

[38] Alasdair MacIntyre will go as far as saying that St. Thomas Aquinas was a "better Aristotelian" than Aristotle himself. As he wrote in the "Prologue" of *After Virtue*'s third edition: "When I wrote *After Virtue*, I was already an Aristotelian, but not yet a Thomist, something made plain in my account of Aquinas at the end of chapter 13. I became a Thomist after writing *After Virtue* in part because I became convinced that Aquinas was in some respects a better Aristotelian than Aristotle, that not only was he an excellent interpreter of Aristotle's texts, but that he had been able to extend and deepen both Aristotle's metaphysical and his moral enquiries." See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd Edition (Notre Dame, In.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), x.

Aristotle's version of *form* was embedded in the world of senses, the very world of senses which Plato considered as deceiving but reckoned by Aristotle as the starting point of thought. Aristotle also affirmed a fundamental coincidence between the mind and the *form* such that, barring any kind of impediment, the *form* was always knowable to the mind just as the mind was always susceptible to receiving the *form*. Aristotle, in other words, was disposed to recognize universal human access to knowledge which for Plato, as it appeared in such works like *Republic* and *Meno*, could only be acquired in a mediated fashion, that is, through the pedagogical mediation of a philosopher.

Eventually, St. Thomas would favor Aristotle and would find in him an appropriate theoretical grounding to support his argument for our knowledge of God. In St. Thomas' time, most people either thought God was immediately knowable (fideism) or hardly knowable at all (agnosticism). Those who claimed that God was immediately knowable, the fideists, believed that God had revealed himself completely through the Sacred Scriptures and that there were no other sources of our knowledge of him except what had been revealed through the testimony of the sacred texts. Those who denied such claim, the agnostics, thought that attempts to know God were a futile exercise in as much as the transcendence of God lay precisely on its being inaccessible to knowledge.

Midway between these two extreme positions was St. Thomas' proposal for a knowledge of God which included both the testimony of the created world and the revelation enshrined in the Sacred Scriptures. Neither of these sources excluded each other; they were in fact complementary and, to one another, mutually necessary.[39] The entirety of creation was revelatory of the artistry and genius of its creator; the Sacred Scriptures, in turn, served as a narrative of the covenant which binds God and his creation. Thanks to such creation, knowledge of God becomes accessible which would have been impossible otherwise. The same grandeur of creation was reckoned by St. Thomas as an important prelude to understanding God's Word. There shouldn't be any conflict then between the world and the Word as they both lend witness to God's radical givenness. In a very subtle way then, St. Thomas was able to overcome the fideists' exclusion of the natural world as a window to knowing God and the agnostics' absolute denial of any

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[39] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Benziger Bros. edition, 1947), Ia.Q1.a1, resp.; Ia.Q2.a2, ad i–iii, <https://isidore.co/aquinas/english/summa/>. See also Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. by Anton C. Pegis, James F. Anderson, Vernon J. Bourke, and Charles J. O'Neil, ed. by Joseph Kenny, O.P. (New York: Hanover House, 1955-57), I.8, <https://isidore.co/aquinas/english/ContraGentiles.htm>.

possibility of theological knowledge. The way St. Thomas put it, God is unknowable as it is, that is, in its essence but its existence is perceptible via the mediation of its created effects.[40]

Up to this point, St. Thomas evidently was following the basic lead of Aristotelian realist epistemology which relies on the prior acknowledgment of the nature of existing things. In other words, in agreement with Aristotle, St. Thomas adhered to the functional relationship between epistemology and metaphysics. In this framework, knowledge was possible by virtue, not of the human subjectivity alone, but of human subjectivity's conjunction with the existence of the knowable world (the subject—object correspondence).[41] Evidently, epistemology did not enjoy a singular preeminence in Aristotelian and Thomist realism the way it did in Descartes or Kant. In the Aristotelian-Thomist schema, epistemology was merely a function of metaphysics or the recognition of the nature of things. St. Thomas, however, disagreed with Aristotle in limiting knowledge to the natural plane. He was not convinced that the fullness of the human capacity to know could be exhausted only by our ability to apprehend the *forms* of existing things. Using the basic Aristotelian teleology against Aristotle himself, St. Thomas reasoned that if indeed the human person could fulfill his or her rational nature by knowing, then there was no other most suitable way to do this than for him or her to know that which is best.[42] St. Thomas qualified *best* as that which was radically different, or that which, for lack of a better term, he designated as God.[43] Knowledge of God does not involve acquisition of *form* for God itself is formless.[44] One may remember that, in the Aristotelian schema, *form* is implicated in the changing physical world. In the domain of natural sciences, the scientist relies on the apprehension of such *form*. But when it comes to knowing that which is changeless (being the author and end itself of change), reason recedes from the scene to make room for faith. Faith is not the opposite of knowledge but a different kind of

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[40] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia.Q8.a1, resp. and ad i-iii; Ia.Q8.a3; and *Summa Contra Gentiles*, II.2.

[41] Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on De Anima*, trans. by Kenelm Foster, O.P. and Sylvester Humphries, O.P. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951), III.4 429a10–429b4, <https://isidore.co/aquinas/english/DeAnima.htm>, Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Metaphysics*, trans. by John P. Rowan (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1961), VII.1–2 (on Aristotle's 1028a 10–1028b 32), <https://isidore.co/aquinas/english/Metaphysics.htm>. See also Aristotle, *De Anima*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (The Revised Oxford Translation) ed. by Jonathan Barnes (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), III.8, 431b20–432a1–10.

[42] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia.Q1.a1, resp. and ad i-iii; Ia.Q2.a1 resp. and ad i–ii; and *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I.7–8.

[43] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia.Q2.a.1, ad ii; Ia.Q2.a2, ad ii.

[44] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia.Q12.a11; Ia.Q12.a12; *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I.14.

knowledge.[45] Whereas reason takes its promptings from the natural world of change, faith draws its inspiration from God's self-communication as inscribed in the Sacred Scriptures. It was Aristotle himself who determined the limits of reason when he confined its horizon within the range of beings.[46] St. Thomas attempted to surpass this metaphysical limit when he shifted the focus of metaphysical inquiry from the metaphysics of *ens* to the metaphysics of *esse*.[47] When Aristotle restricted the concern of metaphysics to the study of *ens*, it gave St. Thomas an opportunity to assert its inherent limitation. *Ens* and *esse* were radically distinguished as suggested by Avicenna and there seemed to be nothing that could connect one with the other except to say that *ens* participates in *esse*.[48] *Esse* is the vast horizon where all existing things, that is, *ens*, lend themselves to experience or appearance. One does not perceive *esse* itself, but one gets an insight into it by virtue of an apprehended *ens*. *Ens*, in other words, may be traced to *esse* but *esse* cannot be traced back to *ens* and yet when Aristotle talks of a divine or supreme being, he alludes to it in the sense of a divine or supreme *ens*[49] and not, as understood by Aquinas, in the fashion of a divine or supreme *esse*.[50] It would seem that metaphysics by nature was confined to the question of *ens* because Aristotle himself took for granted the question of *esse*. He reckoned it as something given or apodictic and hence needless to

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[45] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* Ia.Q12.a13, ad iii.

[46] Aquinas, *Commentary on Metaphysics,* IV.1-2 (1003a-1003b 22); see also Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, IV.1003a–1003b.

[47] This is a theme elaborated by St. Thomas Aquinas in an earlier short but greatly significant treatise, *De Ente et Essentia* translated in English as *Being and Essence*.

[48] In *De Ente et Essentia*, St. Thomas Aquinas built on the distinction between essence and existence as well as between necessary existence and contingent existence put forward by the Islamic scholar Avicenna. A salient part of the said text reads: "We should notice, therefore, that the word 'being,' taken without qualifiers, has two uses, as the Philosopher says in the fifth book of the *Metaphysics*. (1) In one way, it is used apropos of what is divided into the ten genera; (2) in another way, it is used to signify the truth of propositions. The difference between the two is that in the second way everything about which we can form an affirmative proposition can be called a being, even though it posits nothing in reality. It is in this way that privations and negations are called beings; for we say that affirmation is opposed to negation, and that blindness is in the eye. In the first way, however, only what posits something in reality can be called a being. In the first way, therefore, blindness and the like are not beings. So, the word 'essence' is not taken from the word 'being' used in the second way; for some things which do not have an essence are called beings in this way as is clear in the case of privations. Rather, the word 'essence' is taken from the word 'being' used in the first way. It is for this reason that the Commentator says in the same place that the word 'being' used in the first way is what signifies the essence of a real thing." See Thomas Aquinas, *De Ente et Essentia*, ed. by Joseph Kenny, O.P. (1965), 4–5, < https://isidore.co/aquinas/english/DeEnte&Essentia.htm>.

[49] Aquinas, *Commentary on Metaphysics*, XII.6 (1071b3–1071b22); see also Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XII.1073a1–10.

[50] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia.Q4.a2, resp.; *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I.22, 11.

explain. Like Aristotle, St. Thomas likewise did not think of pursuing the question of *esse* as an epistemic problem; unlike Aristotle though, he did consider it as a fertile ground for theological reflection given the well-established Biblical tradition which identifies God with *esse*.[51]

Aristotle did consider that knowledge is impossible without the existence of things but apparently, he took for granted the question as to why they existed in the first place.[52] This is also where Aristotle's realism as appropriated by St. Thomas takes a surprising turn for not only does something indeed exists instead of nothing, it does in fact exist as a gift.[53] It is important to note that the God of *esse* as identified by St. Thomas in the Sacred Scriptures is a God which gives itself in covenant. It is not some distant or disinterested efficient cause (as in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*) or demiurge (as in Plato's *Timaeus*) but one that conveys itself as one already implicated in human history.[54] The response proper to this kind phenomenon is faith. In the Biblical sense, faith is a theatrical act, that is, an activity of beholding.[55] Similar to viewing a play on stage, one fulfills this experience by relinquishing any attempt to explain or categorize what is seen in favor of a fuller appreciation of beauty in its unfolding. This is not to say that knowledge has no role in the act of faith. St. Thomas did talk of "preambles of faith" which should help anyone to see the rational grounding of a theological claim.[56] But even such preambles of faith, according to St. Thomas, should be prompted not by a recollection of *form* nor the perception of being nor by recognition of clear and indubitable idea nor by the imposition of the transcendental categories of human subjectivity. St. Thomas maintained, as did St. Augustine, that *intellectus* follows the lead of *fides*.[57] It is *fides* that opens the path for understanding and if it indeed one succeeds to understand, it is mainly because he or she, at the first instance, commits himself or herself to believe.[58] In this context, realism, more than a quest for an explanation, becomes an encounter with the gift that gives itself in revelation.[59]

St. Thomas Aquinas inherited realism from Aristotle and, like the many ideas he received from him, he appropriated and fashioned it

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[51] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia.Q13.a11; *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I.22, 10

[52] See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XI.1061a1–15.

[53] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia.Q45.a6, resp.; Ia.Q44.a4, ad i.

[54] *Ibid.*, Ia.Q12.a13.

[55] *Ibid.,* Ia.Q12.a11, ad iii.

[56] *Ibid.,* Ia.Q2.a2, ad i.

[57] *Ibid.,* IIaIIae.Q2.a1.

[58] *Ibid.,* IIaIIae.Q1.a4.

[59] *Ibid.,* Ia.Q12.a13; IIaIIae.4.8, ad iii.

according to his theological purpose. Realism was what enabled Aristotle to know "being as being," hence, his conviction that metaphysics was the first philosophy and also a divine science.[60] The pursuit of the best way to demonstrate knowledge of being via recourse to first principles convinced the Philosopher that metaphysics was the most suitable path towards achieving *episteme*.[61] For St. Thomas Aquinas, however, knowledge did not end with knowing "being as being" but knowing being as an ensemble within the whole order of providence.[62] This means that the destiny of being does not lie on its being merely known but on its being known as something given and invested with love. To recognize something as given, that is, as gift, immediately invites acknowledgment of a relationship.[63] If something is a gift, it must have ensued from the generosity of a giver. This whole dynamics of giving, as St. Thomas Aquinas held, is only possible within the economy of gratuity, or in a more theological expression, the economy of grace.[64] Unfortunately, this performance of giving which the term *creation* evokes is far beyond the horizon of Aristotle or his metaphysics. Aristotle could only imagine a world of beings as existing on their own; even his notion of a supreme Being was depicted as some entity that was self-contained, unfamiliar and estranged. Yes, metaphysics could disclose the purported nature of things, but their true nobility will always remain hidden from its view. It was this inherent limitation that led St. Thomas to think that when it comes to the grammar of grace, metaphysics would be utterly constrained.[65] One can genuinely speak of radical self-giving, which the term "God" suggests, only within the framework of the narrative of God's self-disclosure, the Sacred Scriptures. The Sacred Scriptures is traditionally considered as the testament of God's revelation. Such revelation however is neither a mere datum nor an idea but an enactment of a covenant.[66] The key to seeing or recognizing God, in other words, involves an acknowledgment of this covenant which is history-bound yet history-

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[60] Aristotle, *Metaphysics,* VI.1026a1–30.

[61] *Ibid.,* IV.1105b1–15; see also Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 73a.20–25.

[62] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* Ia.Q20.a2, ad ii.

[63] Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae de Potentia Dei,* trans. by the English Dominican Fathers, ed. Joseph Kenny, O.P. (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1952), Q5.a1, ad xvi, <https://isidore.co/aquinas/english/QDdePotentia.htm>.

[64] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia.Q8.a3, ad iv.

[65] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia.Q1.a1, resp.; *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I.5; and Thomas Aquinas, *De Trinitate Boethii*, trans. by Rose E. Brennan, S.H.N. and Armand Mauer (Herder and Toronto, 1946 and 1953), Q2.a2, <https://isidore.co/aquinas/english/BoethiusDeTr.htm>.

[66] John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio,* 7-12; see also Aquinas, *Inaugural Lectures.*

disruptive.[67] Within this framework, metaphysics loses its potency. In the face of the event of God's covenant-making, the appropriate response is not *cogito*, or I think, but *credo*, that is, I believe.[68] Fundamentally, what is involved in this act of believing is not a set of logical or epistemological categories, not even a compendium of first principles but an ethical commitment. This ethical commitment undergirds the person's decision to live her life as a constant practice of self-donation not so much because God needs her but because the person finds fulfillment in imitating God in its very act of self-giving.[69]

Hence, in a rather ironic twist, St. Thomas Aquinas managed to articulate the unity between faith and reason by stipulating the demarcation line that secures their respective autonomies. It is this odd union by segregation that makes the interface work.[70] Reason and faith are distinct, but they are not exclusively apart. Reason is united to faith because the human person's desire to know also includes what lies beyond the mind's fragile grasp. Faith is united to reason because one's religious belief cannot allow itself to be an easy prey to incoherence.[71] As asserted by St. John Paul II and later amplified by Alasdair MacIntyre, faith and reason are two autonomous modes of inquiry whose answers to their own questions may or may not overlap.[72] The challenge therefore is not so much to ask whether or not such overlap should take place but whether one is willing to push reason to its limits up to the point it can recognize the possibility of faith and to demonstrate faith to such extent that one is willing to examine its own fundamental truth claims. In thought and in practice, this is exactly what St. Thomas Aquinas demonstrated.

Conclusion

What I have been trying to develop in the preceding discussion may be summed up in three important points. First, Thomism drew its inspiration from St. Thomas Aquinas, but one may not equate the former as a comprehensive embodiment of the thought of the latter. St. Thomas Aquinas himself did not set out to establish a well-defined speculative

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[67] John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 23, 92-95.

[68] Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium Theologiae*, trans. by Cyril Vollert, S.J. (St. Louis & London: B. Herder Book Co., 1947), Chapters 1–2, <https://isidore.co/aquinas/Compendium.htm>.

[69] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IaIIae.Q3.a2.

[70] John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 43–44.

[71] *Ibid.*, 18.

[72] John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 77–79; see also MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 165–171.

system under his name nor, in his intellectual pursuits, sought to secure his legacy for posterity. Thomism, at best, was an appropriation of St. Thomas' intellectual heritage carried on by readers and commentators across generations. That such generations of scholars were confronted with different problems and questions of their times partly explained the plural nature of Thomism's own evolution. There could be, in other words, as many Thomisms as there were issues and problems directly or indirectly related to St. Thomas' thought. In other words, the continuing relevance of his legacy lies precisely in the countless ways by which the questions and answers he propounded are read and interpreted in response to situations that may require a distinctly Thomist perspective.

Second, St. Thomas did follow Aristotle closely, but he was not the only one he followed, and neither did he follow him carelessly. Although St. Thomas did acquire various ideas from Aristotle, it can nonetheless be argued that his engagement with the Greek thinker was itself connected with his dialogue with various other influences like Plato, St. Augustine, Boethius, the Neo-Platonists not to mention, the Roman literati, the Fathers of the Church, the Stoics as well as the Islamic and Jewish thinkers. The charge, therefore, that St. Thomas Aquinas merely baptized Aristotle is clearly a case of oversimplification. In fact, the extent of his dependence on the Stagirite may be gauged by his intention to show the clear demarcation line between the latter's version of divine science (metaphysics) and Christianity's sacred theology. While St. Thomas himself admitted that there was no inherent conflict between reason (as represented by Aristotle) and faith (as narrated in the Sacred Scriptures), each of them, as he saw it, enjoyed impermeable autonomy in its respective sphere. The unity between faith and reason, in other words, is neither a fusion nor amalgamation but a dynamic relationship characterized by respectful cooperation amidst a well-defined distance between two different but complementary worldviews.

Third, and intimately related with the preceding point, the unity between faith and reason advocated by St. Thomas Aquinas, may be best appreciated within the context of philosophic realism adopted by him from Aristotle. Thanks to such version of realism, St. Thomas succeeded to develop a philosophic and theological grammar which lent theoretical support to his explication of creation, his philosophy of the human person besides his ethical and political theories. As shown in the paper, however, not all Thomists were amenable to this Aristotelian bent of Thomism. The Neo-Thomists of the nineteenth century were prime examples of the attempt to extricate St. Thomas' thought from its Aristotelian bind. As shown earlier, this move was key in establishing the pivot for Thomism from metaphysics to transcendental orientation of Kantianism. In recent

years, this resistance to Aristotle has also gained significant traction from such scholars who would rather read St. Thomas via his engagement of Plato or Neo-Platonism or even St. Augustine or lately, analytic philosophy or phenomenology. It does seem that the evolution of Thomism as an intellectual system remains an open story. This has undoubtedly tremendous implication on the hermeneutical status of the interface between faith and reason. It remains to be seen whether there would be a paradigm or paradigms which could match or even dislodge the Aristotle-inspired realist framework of the faith and reason dynamics. This shouldn't really be a problem as long as the collaborative space between faith and reason is kept guarded. After all, St. Thomas Aquinas' solicitation of Aristotle's genius had always been guided by his theological goals and his recognition of the ancillary function of philosophy. In the process of studying and commenting on the oeuvre of the Stagirite, St. Thomas himself managed to produce outputs that equal and, in some cases, surpass, in terms of insight and relevance, the very works of the so-called "Philosopher." Aristotle supplied the terms, ideas, and discursive strategies that allowed St. Thomas to demonstrate the efficacy of the Greek metaphysical thought alongside its inadequacy. On this account, other versions of Thomism may seem justified to turn to other interpretive sources to further extend St. Thomas Aquinas' philosophic-theological enterprise. But notwithstanding its shortcomings, it would be extremely difficult to refute Aristotle's realism without calling into question the theoretical context of faith and reason dialogue as conceived by St. Thomas Aquinas.

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