

1. Twentieth-Century Thomisms

It generally happens that schools of thought following a great thinker end up riven by internal debates regarding what kind of adherence to the master is necessary for membership in the school. At one extreme stand those who believe in strict fidelity to the original thought as expressed in the canonical texts; in their conservative view, the main work of the school is exegesis, commentary, and defense against external criticism. At the other extreme stand those who believe that fidelity to the master entails adherence to a shared set of basic insights that must be creatively rethought and contextualized in the light of contemporary intellectual currents; in their progressive view, the main work of the school is *engagement*: dialogue with other views, internal self-criticism, and the formulation of answers to new questions from out of the tradition's resources. The two extremes tend to look suspiciously upon each other's projects. The conservatives tend to look upon any deviation from the original *philosophia perennis* as a kind of corruption: How dare the disciple purport to improve upon the original! The more creative disciples look upon the conservative project as intellectually stultifying, stagnant, and irrelevant. The conservative disciples generally do not want to be called "neo-" because they like to think they are faithful to the original, while the creative disciples usually want to be seen as somehow "neo-" in order to distinguish themselves from the strict disciples and to highlight their original contribution to the tradition. This tension can be seen in the histories of Platonism, Aristotelianism, Kantianism, Hegelianism, etc. It is certainly found within Thomism, especially in the twentieth-century.¹

Twentieth-century Thomism is not monolithic but comprises instead various ways of perpetuating the thought of Aquinas. To understand the internal tension between conservative and progressive Thomisms it is necessary to go back to the founding moment of the Thomistic revival: Pope Leo XIII's 1879 encyclical *Aeterni Patris*. While a revival of medieval modes of thinking, commonly known as Neo-Scholasticism, pre-dates the encyclical, the issuance of the encyclical gave the movement an *imprimatur* and a powerful institutional backing (reiterated by Leo's successors) that would make it the dominant and normative strain in Roman

¹ For an overview of the history of Thomism prior to the twentieth-century, see O'Meara, 152-167.

Catholic thought up until the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).² Leo's campaign to promote a restoration of Neo-Scholasticism within Catholic education was motivated by his conviction that post-Cartesian and especially Kantian philosophy was at the root of the major intellectual errors of the day, especially in theology. Leo's criticism of modern philosophy was not articulated in a syllabus-like listing of objectionable positions, but rather in the claim that the basic error vitiating modern philosophy was its repudiation of the tutelage of faith. Leo therefore argued that what was needed above all was a return to the practice of philosophizing in obedience to faith: "Those, therefore, who to the study of philosophy unite obedience to the Christian faith are philosophers indeed."³ This mode of philosophizing in docility to Christian faith was the patrimony of the Church from the Fathers and the medieval Doctors; according to Leo, that long tradition had reached its climax in Thomas Aquinas, "the chief and master of all."

Leo's call for a return to Thomas Aquinas was an attempt to promote a way of thinking that had been consciously repudiated by modernity. Hence there was from the beginning an inherent tension between Thomism and modernity insofar as the former was seen as something of an antidote to the latter. The more conservative forms of Thomism were destined to be self-consciously and resolutely anti-modern, especially with respect to the modern starting point of subjectivity and its attendant epistemological problems. Many such Thomists were inclined to see modernity as a centuries-long dead end that should not be engaged but rather repudiated. It would be a mistake, however, to construe Leo's call for a return to Thomas as a naive attempt to turn back the intellectual clock. The encyclical acknowledges the great progress of modern science as a boon to humanity; there had been genuine advances in human knowledge. What Leo envisioned as the benefit of renewed Thomism was not simply a corrective to modernity's philosophical errors, but also an overarching integrative framework with respect to the advances in modern knowledge and culture. Leo hoped that a revived Thomism would be foundational and architectonic for all the other human disciplines. While philosophy was the master of all the human sciences, it was itself subservient to theology as the more-than-human science of the divine; hence Thomistic philosophy's architectonic and integrative activity would be within the context of a docility to Thomistic theology. Leo's vision of Thomism as integrative of all that was true in modern culture would provide the inspiration for the project of the progressive end of the Thomist spectrum: open engagement and dialogue with modern thought.

The narrative of twentieth-century Neo-Thomism, especially in its pre-Vatican II period, reflects the inherent ambivalence of the Leonine project between Thomism as corrective of modernity and as integrative of modernity. It is the tale of various construals of the kind of Thomism appropriate to the needs of the times:

² On the nineteenth-century background to *Aeterni Patris*, see Gerald McCool's *Nineteenth-Century Scholasticism: The Quest for a Unitary Method* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989). See also *Christliche Philosophie in katholischen Denken des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*. Band 2: *Rückgriff auf scholastisches Erbe*. Ed. Emerich Coreth, S.J., Walter Neidl, and Georg Pfligersdorffer (Vienna: Verlag Styria, 1988), 72-308.

³ I am quoting the document as it appears in the appendix to the useful symposium *One Hundred Years of Thomism*, ed. Victor B. Brezik, C.S.B. (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1981), 181.

from a return to the strict Thomism of the classical commentators like Cajetan and John of St. Thomas, to a return to Thomas himself in his thirteenth-century context as part of *ressourcement*, to the transcendental turn to the modern subject; all these versions of Thomism were thought to provide the appropriate resources for engaging the modern world. The purpose of this chapter is to give some kind of topology of these twentieth-century Thomisms. It is generally agreed that the Second Vatican Council marks a watershed in Thomism in the twentieth-century, and I shall divide my treatment accordingly. I shall devote more space to chronicling the pre-Vatican II period, however, for two reasons. First, because it stands at more of a distance from us at the dawn of a new century, and therefore I presume it is more likely that the reader will need some orientation. Second, because the more recent trends in Thomism are still works in progress and so do not easily admit of characterization. The aim of the pre-Vatican II overview is not to set out in detail the various doctrinal positions of the key figures; to the extent that their positions merit exposition in the context of this book, they will receive it in the appropriate chapters. The main concern in what follows is rather to give a sense of what makes for different versions of Thomism. What was the problematic being addressed? Who was being addressed? The overview is in no way meant to be exhaustive; there were more Thomists and Thomisms than will be mentioned here.⁴ The criteria for inclusion involve a judgment about the historical importance of what is chronicled and its relevance to the concerns of this book.

I. PRE-VATICAN II THOMISMS

A. Early French Dominican Thomism

The newly reconstituted Dominican Order in France was responsible for some of the most important early work in the Thomist revival of the twentieth-century. In order to understand and appreciate early twentieth-century French Thomism of any type, however, it is necessary to see it as a response to the challenges to traditional Catholic theology and philosophy posed by Maurice Blondel and Henri Bergson.⁵ Blondel, a devout Catholic, accepted the post-Kantian claim that religious faith could not be justified by an appeal to traditional metaphysics (proofs for the existence of God) or traditional apologetics (miracles). Like Schleiermacher, Blondel wanted to justify faith through an analysis of immanent consciousness. Blondel's project, most notably in *L'Action*, was to show that human consciousness manifests an inherent dynamism toward fulfillment in the

⁴ The most exhaustive survey of Neo-Scholasticism in the twentieth-century is found in *Christliche Philosophie in katholischen Denken des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*. Band 2: *Rückgriff auf scholastisches Erbe*, 310-858. The best-known studies in English of twentieth-century Neo-Thomism are by Gerald McCool, S.J.: *From Unity to Pluralism: The Internal Evolution of Thomism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989) and *The Neo-Thomists* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1994). McCool's historical thesis and his interpretations of Gilson and Maritain have been subjected to some warranted criticism in *Thomistic Papers VI*, ed. John F. X. Knasas (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1994). For an overview of twentieth-century Thomisms from a more theological perspective, see O'Meara, 167-200.

⁵ See McCool, "Blondel, Bergson, and the French Dominicans," in *The Neo-Thomists*, 43-74. See also Roger Aubert, *Le problème de l'acte de foi. Données traditionnelles et résultats des controverses récentes*. Fourth edition. (Louvain: Presses Universitaires, 1969).

divine that is located not in the intellect, however, but in the will. Blondel believed that his analysis was superior to the traditional Neo-Scholastic approach because it appealed to the whole person, especially the will, in contrast to the overly rationalistic appeal of the standard approach. Henri Bergson, who was not a Catholic, was nonetheless enormously influential and attractive to his Catholic contemporaries (including such disparate characters as Etienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain, and Reginald Garrigou-LaGrange) because he provided an alternative to the reigning philosophy of positivism. In contrast to the lifeless, inert, and mechanized view of reality espoused by the positivists, Bergson claimed that reality was characterized by a vital process of life and spirit known as *élan vital*. This deepest reality is opaque to the static conceptualizations of science and traditional philosophy, which therefore had only an instrumental value; the true nature of reality could only be grasped by an intuition. The cumulative effect of Blondel and Bergson was to call into question the traditional epistemological and metaphysical underpinnings of Catholic thought. Epistemologically, it challenged the primacy and value of intellectual/conceptual knowledge. Concepts did not seem adequate either to subjective experience or to the nature of vital reality itself. Theologically, this devaluation of concepts seemed to threaten the normative status of dogmatic formulations. Metaphysically, Bergson was perceived as especially threatening since he privileged becoming over being. Blondel posed a problem that would vex and divide Thomists throughout the twentieth-century: if one accepts the post-Kantian assumption that the metaphysical door to God is indeed shut, then is it possible to begin in subjectivity or immanence and indeed arrive at the living God?

Formulating responses to the currents set in motion by Blondel and Bergson would occupy French Thomists of varying persuasions for the first few decades of the century. Ambrose Gardeil, the founding figure of the great Dominican center of studies *Le Saulchoir*, set the tone for the Dominican response in arguing that a return to traditional Thomistic metaphysics and epistemology was the proper response to Bergsonianism. Against both the idealist denial and Bergsonian devaluation of conceptual knowledge, Gardeil defended its validity by a metaphysical analysis of knowledge as rooted in an immanent formal principle (the *species*) that gave access to extra-mental reality precisely because it had been formally caused by its object; there is a formal identity of knower and known in the act of knowledge that is based on the formal causality of the real. On the basis of abstraction, the mind is able to form a concept of being that can then serve as the basis for metaphysics. In the long debates that would ensue regarding the proper Thomistic response to the modern epistemological problematic, this strategy would be the backbone of the traditional response. Gardeil was not simply interested, however, in the vindication of Thomistic intellectual claims. He also wanted to demonstrate that Thomism was not a form of religious intellectualism. To that end he did important work in studying Aquinas's position on faith. Blondel's charge that traditional accounts of religious justification neglected the volitional or affective dimension of the human person was shown to have no bite against the authentic Thomistic account.⁶ According to Aquinas, belief is the response of the

⁶ The Thomistic account of faith will be considered in the next chapter.

whole person, intellect and will. The mind assents to the truth revealed by God, a truth it cannot fathom, precisely on the basis of the will's loving response to God as ultimate Good. Both these elements, intellect and will, can only come into contact with the living God under the influence of divine grace; there is no such thing as "natural" faith. Thus Gardeil proposed a return to traditional Thomistic metaphysics, epistemology, and doctrine of grace as the appropriate response to Blondel, Bergson, and indeed modernity in general.

Several other French Dominicans, like Roland-Gosselin and A.-D. Sertillanges, played an important part in the response to Blondel and Bergson. Yet in terms of the Thomist topology of this chapter, the more significant Thomist to emerge at this time was Reginald Garrigou-Lagrance. Garrigou-Lagrance is often disparagingly referred to by other Thomists as an expositor of "Strict-Observance Thomism" or even "Paleo-Thomism" because of his affinity for the classical Dominican commentators (Cajetan and John of St. Thomas) and his polemical attitude towards other interpretations of Thomas.⁷ Garrigou-Lagrance made an early name for himself in the polemic against Bergson, but his most enduring work to emerge out of this early period was a full-scale defense of traditional natural theology in *Dieu: son existence, sa nature* (1914).⁸ Garrigou-Lagrance's metaphysical approach presupposes the intellect's ability to grasp the concept of being through abstraction and then to articulate a science of being rigorously following the principle of non-contradiction, the principle of causality, and the Aristotelian division of being into potency and act. Upon this metaphysical and epistemological foundation, according to Garrigou-Lagrance, the traditional five arguments for the existence of God could be defended against all modern objections. Garrigou-Lagrance's massive commentaries on the *Summa theologiae* and his numerous treatises on spiritual theology made him one of the most influential of all Catholic authors in the pre-Vatican II period. His influence was not limited to his own work, since his long-standing prominence at the *Angelicum* (the Dominican pontifical university in Rome) led to such an extraordinary influence in the Vatican that his version of Thomism assumed a quasi-official status. By the time Garrigou-Lagrance attained such power, however, his version of Thomism had been called into question even by his own confrères. His style of Thomism would not stand up well against the new research into the historical Aquinas, and he came to be seen by some as a kind of Thomistic dinosaur. He was indeed the last of a dying breed: the grand Dominican commentators on Aquinas. There was great insight in Garrigou-LaGrange's work, and he is still a valuable source to consult as a kind of encyclopedia of the grand commentators. Yet the historical research that was going on contemporaneously to Garrigou-Lagrance's own commentaries would reveal a Thomas that did not always cohere with his commentators. The discrepancy between Thomas and his commentators (which should not be exaggerated) would lay bare the fact that the commentators themselves were interpreters of Thomas, Neo-Thomists if you will, who brought to bear their own presuppositions, prejudices, and problematics in their reading of

⁷ See the chapter on "Garrigou-Lagrance and Strict-Observance Thomism" in Helen James John S.N.D., *The Thomist Spectrum* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1966), 3-15.

⁸ The English translation is *God: His Existence and Nature*, trans. Dom Bede Rose, O.S.B. from the fifth French edition, Two Volumes (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1934-36).



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