Reconsidering Scholasticism

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Though rigid, Catholic philosophy before the council wasn't all bad

By HOWARD KAINZ

A philosophy major in a Catholic college during the '50s would very likely be able to identify with my experiences. My 36 hours of the courses required for the major consisted largely of the various branches of Scholastic philosophy - formal and material logic, epistemology, cosmology, ontology, rational psychology, general and special ethics and a special course entitled "Thomistic synthesis."

These courses were highly systematic and basically concerned with presenting - for want of a better name - "the truth." Every once in a while, the teacher would stop to engage in in-house disputes with other Scholastics - criticizing the Scots for their nominalism, or Suarezians for their cavalier attitude toward the distinction between essence and existence, and so on — but these debates were more or less amicable. Less amicable were the thinly veiled refutations of the skepticism of Bentham, Diogenes and Immanuel Kant, or the rebuttals of the empiricists and their mistakes about induction, or the discrediting of the idealism of Bishop George Berkeley, and so forth.

At graduation I felt I was fairly up-to-date on the important developments in the philosophical world and decided to apply for graduate study at the University of California, Los Angeles. As I was signing up for courses, the chairman of the UCLA philosophy department, who had looked at my transcripts, took me aside and warned me that, as a "Thomist," I was going to have difficulty in their graduate program. But I was optimistic and even signed up for his course on the Theory of Knowledge, which had to do largely with "raw feels" and how we knew the real existence of pieces of chalk and other things in the real world.

At the end of the semester, he called me into his office, told me that I had a 'C' for the course in spite of what I thought was an excellent paper on "Retrocognition," and that I would have to leave the program or be put on probation. I did some quick calculations and then asked him whether my grade point average wouldn't still be well above a 3.0, even with the 'C.' He replied, "Oh, was I the only bastard?" — Apparently he hadn't even looked at my other grades but just presumed that because of my Thomistic background I wouldn't be able to "cut the mustard."

This incident made me aware of the prejudice that then prevailed about what "goes on" in a philosophy department in a Catholic university. Remnants of this prejudice still remain. The stereotype of a Catholic philosophy department was, and often still is, the image of a veritable nunnery at the service of religious dogma and the papal chain of command. At any rate, I wasn't sure that I was all that interested in continuing in philosophy at that time and decided to travel to Africa and other countries for a couple years to see what the world outside California was really like.

When I returned from my travels, I entered the graduate program at St. Louis University, which was largely Thomistic, and eventually started work on a master's thesis on Thomistic angelology. To make ends meet, I took a part-time teaching job at Maryville College in the vicinity of St. Louis, and after choosing the books to be assigned for the semester was told by the dean that I had to get the bishop's permission to use some of these texts. I had assigned some texts from Immanuel Kant, and many of the writings of Immanuel Kant were on the Index Librorum Prohibitorum. A letter of permission from the bishop was required, and the permission could then be extended to all of one's students.

In recent years, out of curiosity I borrowed the now-defunct Index from our library, and discovered that Kant was roundly disapproved of by the ecclesiastical authorities. I was delighted to note, however, that one of my favorite philosophers, Hegel, was completely absent from the Index of Forbidden Books. Possibly someone at the curia in the 19th century knew that, although Hegel was critical of Catholicism, he preferred the speculative Catholic approach to theology over the Protestant approach. Or — a less pleasant thought — the ecclesiastical authorities just didn't understand what Hegel was up to.

This was the era of major change in the church and the heady enthusiasm of the Vatican. Many ecclesiastical and theological reforms were agreed upon at the Second Vatican Council and began to be implemented in dioceses around the world, but also, around the same time, for some reason, changes began to be made in philosophy departments. No directive from Vatican II ever said, "Wean the Catholic philosophy departments away from Scholasticism."

But gradually and almost imperceptibly something like a weaning did take place.

Away from Thomism

Possibly the Papal Encyclical Humanatar Vitae, with its controversial invocation of Thomistic natural law against artificial contraception, turned many away from Thomism as the official Catholic philosophy/theology and helped to instill doubts about papal authority. Possibly the rising interest in the ecumenical movement — another result of Vatican II — and the felt necessity of avoiding theological ghetotomies led to the desire to investigate all and sundry philosophical schools of thought.

In any case, there was a definite movement away from the predominately Scholastic curriculum.

At the present time, only a few Catholic universities or colleges have a curriculum of that type. There are, of course, offerings of logic, ethics, metaphysics, and so on, in Catholic colleges; but the content of these courses often bears little resemblance to the Scholastic prototypes.

If we examine larger patterns regarding the evolution of philosophy departments in Catholic colleges, the main movement, starting in the '60s and continuing through the '70s, seems to have been toward "the history of philosophy." There are some exceptions: Notre Dame gravitated toward "mainstream" analytic philosophy, Duquesne University toward contemporary Continental philosophy, and a few Catholic colleges and universities like Aquinas College and the University of Dallas remained and still remain Thomistic-ly oriented.

But I have some problems understanding the resort to history. What is the cash-value of a Catholic college in "specializing" in the history of philosophy? Is this, for all practical purposes, just a variation of curricula in the "history of ideas"?

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philosophies, and all ideas, to be consid­
ered? And how does one avoid eclecticism in the choices of historical concentrations? Certainly there are some downsidet to this approach. For one thing, there is the danger of becoming a mere historian. Also, in the choices of historical concentrations? Conceivably we could end up training graduate students to become historians, rather than "doing" philosophy. In other words, a graduate student, depending on the choice of courses and the makeup of his/her dissertation committee, could quite conceivably receive a Ph.D. for knowing what so-and-so said about such-and-such, and possibly also what the critics or sup­porters of so-and-so said, without this grad student ever thinking out his or her own position and presenting it to be defended.

But a subtler and more important danger, it seems to me, could be the encroachment of a general diffidence about attaining the truth. I think of the anthologies in ethics that are often used as textbooks, with rep­resentative samplings of utilitarianism, deontology, situation-ethics, natural-law theories, communitarian ethics, pragma­ticism, and so on. And with regard to the­oretical philosophy, I think of the frequent disciplining of long-standing Catholic tradi­tions, as we roll through the writings of the major philosophers.

After reading Kant's First Critique, presum­ably we should conclude that we can't know anything about God, freedom or immortali­ty. So why should we think seriously about metaphysical issues any more, except per­haps to refute their possibility or to castigate dogmatic positions on these issues? (Possibly language-analysis, like an island in the stormy sea, presents itself to us as a safer approach; at least Kant didn't say we couldn't know anything about our own language.)

Kant the tip of the iceberg

But Kant is just "the tip of the iceberg." What about Nietzsche? Should we just try to take him with the proverbial "grain of salt"? But if we discerned his true meaning, shouldn't we be suspicious of Christianity itself, as a perpetuator, along with Judaism, of a "slave" morality? And shouldn't we be just a bit apologetic for having fostered this suspet morality on the Western world? There is also the possibility that individual professors can become compartmentalized in an unhealthy fashion. One can conceivably spend years becoming a specialist in Hume or Kant or Nietzsche or Sartre or Rus­sell, and wake up one morning to find that their personal beliefs and ethics run in one direction, while their research and teaching go in quite another direction.

But of course we all have our specialization, and we want to avoid "throwing out the baby with the bathwater." A minority of Catholic philosophers may be fortunate enough to align themselves with philoso­phers basically in accord with Christian tradi­tions, even in modern and contemporary philosophy. Your list will no doubt differ from mine, but I would include on my list Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz, Friedrich Wil­helm Schelling, Hegel, Soren Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel and Max Scheler. But for the majority, the "handwriting on the wall" seems to be to combine history with system­atic criticism.

Does one who presents Kant's criticisms of the arguments for the exis­tence of God really want to leave it at that, schedule a quiz and then go on to the next item on the syllabus? Does one who analyzes Jean Paul Sartre's claim that the concept of God is an impos­sible synthesis of the en-soi and for-soi really want to present that as the last word? Or is the specialist in Kant or Sartre continually conversant with literature not only explaining these positions but also presenting cogent counter-arguments? And even then, at some point, in many courses like these, the professor has to go beyond the incessant pro's and cons and give "equal time" to his/her own considered position regarding what is true, and/or what is right.

It is also possible, even with modern philosophers, to unite the historical and sys­tematic approaches. Aquinas is a good example of this, raising issues prevailing in the then-current philosophies, discussing opposing positions, then arguing with great clarity for his own position. The formalistic Viti­tor quods sed et conatus and respondeo dicendum quod of medieval Scholasticism are no longer in style, but there are other ways to unite history with systematic anal­ysis of issues. In modern philosophy, Hegel, who maintained that there was one system of philosophy unfolding in and through the history of philosophy, offers us the best 19th century example of the unification of system and history. In recent decades, Richard Rorty's Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature and Alas­dair MacIntyre's After Virtue also give us some excellent examples of the way that deep examination of philosophical issues can be combined with broad-ranging historical analy­sis.

In ethics, perhaps it is time to stop trying to figure out how the Categorical Impera­tive can really be applied to our personal maxims, or try­ing to estimate with some pre­cision the quantity or quality of the consequences of our acts or our rules, and reexamine natural-law theory. Numer­ous lawyers and judges, as well as philoso­phers and political scientists, have taken an interest in the new analytic approach to nat­ural-law theory of Germain Grisez and John Finnis, which has elicited spirited disputa­tions with proponents of a more traditional Thomist approach, like Ralph McInerny, Vernon Bourke and Henry Veatch. The "handwriting on the wall" may also include some strategic alliances with the

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Empirical sciences. The problem of the "two cultures" described by C. P. Snow some years ago — the rift between the humanities and the sciences — is still with us. The philosophical version of this consists in the position that philosophy is completely independent of the sciences. But a lot of "water" has come over the "dam" since Aristotelian science, which was the background for Thomistic philosophy.

In our time, physicists, cosmologists and astronomers seem to be more intent on developing proofs for the existence of God than philosophers; quantum physicists discuss the applications of quantum indeterminacy to human freedom, and stray into the sort of speculations about the existence and immortality of the soul that used to be the province of metaphysicians; and neurophysiologists seem to be searching for the connection between mind and body that Descartes mistakenly traced to the pineal gland. Certainly many scientists are exploring traditional philosophical issues; and a collaboration between philosophy and science may be an important catalyst for progress in both of the two "cultures."

Christian philosophy?

One final hurdle for philosophy in a Catholic setting is: What about Christian philosophy? Some of us may recall, or have had experiences of, the disdain that Thomists were once held in, by "mainstream" philosophers. The complaint was that they were adulterating philosophy with theology. Certainly this criticism does not apply to the philosophy of religion, which is now considered "mainstream," thanks to the efforts of David Hume, J. S. Mill and others. But the philosophy of religion is not Christian philosophy. And one must distinguish the strictly Christian philosophy of Kierkegaard or Marcel from a professional interest in problems associated with Christian or Catholic doctrines.

A Jewish physicist has written a book, *Genesis and the Big Bang*, arguing for the compatibility of the "seven days" of Genesis with contemporary physics. Possibly a Christian philosopher could make further contributions to the explanation of Genesis. And there are many other philosophical issues that need to be explored, with reference to theological beliefs.

Recently I was looking in the *Philosopher's Index* for an article or book explaining the discrepancies in the resurrection story of Jesus, who on the one hand walks through walls, but on the other hand eats fish and tells the Thomas the Apostle to put his hand in his resurrected body. But I couldn't find anything on this subject. I have been similarly unsuccessful in finding materials on the strictly epistemological issues connected with papal infallibility: For example, when the doctrine of papal infallibility was first announced, was this an infallible doctrine? And the critiques of transubstantiation of the Eucharist by Thomas Hobbes, Charles Peirce and others certainly deserve some serious philosophical critiques.

In summary, the spirit of Scholasticism, which emphasized a systematic approach to problems and issues, did tend to get rigidified and dogmatic, in spite of the efforts of Étienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain and others, and no doubt needed something like an aggiornamento to be nudged out of its wonted grooves. But there was much worth preserving in the scholastic approach. The various adaptations and coordinations suggested above are undoubtedly complex, but they may be worth the effort.

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