

REVIEW ARTICLE

**Etienne Gilson: *ELEMENTS OF
CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY***

BY

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Elements of Christian Philosophy. By ETIENNE GILSON. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1960. Pp. 360. \$7.00.

ONLY forty years ago, some historians doubted whether any work of philosophic significance had been done during the middle ages. Only forty years ago, some Catholic scholars identified scholastic philosophy with the least common denominator of the positions held by Alexander of Hales, St. Albert the Great, St. Bonaventure, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Venerable John Duns Scotus; differences among their positions were considered details, although a line was drawn to exclude William Ockham from scholasticism. Only forty years ago, many students of Aquinas could find no important distinction between his philosophy, that of Aristotle, and that of Aquinas' various commentators. Only forty years ago, many students were taught a so-called Thomism, the conclusions of which Aquinas might have uttered, but the principles of which had more in common with the thought of Descartes, Kant, or Hegel than with that of Aquinas.

Gilson appeared; medieval philosophy had found its competent historian and effective champion. Not only those who studied with him but everyone interested in medieval philosophy learned from him. Not suddenly and not easily but by a sustained and tremendous effort, Gilson and his students dispelled a darkness that had closed over the middle ages at the renaissance. Gilson showed that genuine philosophic developments did occur during the middle ages and that modern philosophy could hardly be understood without studying the works of the great scholastic doctors. Gilson showed that differences among scholastic doctors were not mere details, that their differences were at the heart of their philosophies, and that least-common-denominator scholasticism was an invention of incompetent historians. Gilson showed that Aquinas' philo-

sophic thought is a genuine advance upon Aristotle's thought, not a mere baptism of it, and that the agreement of Aquinas' commentators with him in respect to conclusions masked their divergence from him in respect to fundamental principles—the reasons which are more characteristic of a philosophy than its conclusions. Gilson showed that the proof of Thomistic theses by employing principles indifferently—rationalist, critical, or idealist—did not represent Thomistic philosophy. In the academic world at large, Gilson established a new requirement for talking about medieval philosophy and for teaching Thomism—that one should know what he is talking about, not by description but by acquaintance; Gilson set this generation of Thomists to reading Aquinas himself.

Knowing Aquinas and being aware of the requirements for historical accuracy have not made it easier for us to teach philosophy. The lazy devices of proof by the simplest principles—even if Cartesian, Kantian, or Hegelian—and refutation of the most easily refuted adversaries—even if imaginary—no longer are practiced in good conscience. Waves of textbooks appear with increasing rapidity in recurring attempts to provide an adequate means for introducing students to the thought of Aquinas and for showing its significance without using strawmen for dialectical contrast. These efforts to present a Thomistic system have resulted in constructions showing more or less philosophic merit and debt to Aquinas. I think we could agree that most textbooks diverge sharply from Aquinas, that they are philosophically incompetent, and that they are more difficult to understand—although easier to image and memorize—than almost any work of philosophic worth. We might wish to make a few exceptions to this condemnation of the textbooks, but we would differ about the exceptions, since they would be the books from which we happen to have learned what we individually call “Thomism” or the ones our diverse philosophic views happen to reflect.

Consequently, the announcement that Professor Gilson was writing a textbook suitable to introduce students to the reading of the actual texts of Aquinas aroused considerable hope that

some of the problems of teaching philosophy were about to be eased. *Elements of Christian Philosophy* is an unusual textbook and an interesting book in its own right. It is an important book, since it presents in the most synthetic formulation Gilson has attempted so far his interpretation of Aquinas as a *Christian* philosopher and as a philosopher of *God as subsistent being*.

In this article I shall describe first the content and order of Gilson's book. Second, I shall comment on the book as a textbook. Third, I shall offer some comments on Gilson's conception of Christian philosophy.*

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In a brief preface, Gilson explains the nature of this book. By "Christian philosophy," Gilson designates the doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas; by "elements," he designates the basic notions and positions which are not restated in every question but which always are required for an understanding of Aquinas' answers. First and foremost among these philosophic elements, according to Gilson, is the specific way in which the theologian uses philosophy. The first of the four parts of the book, therefore, is devoted to this topic: "Revelation and the Christian Teacher."

In the first chapter, "The Teacher of Christian Truth," Gilson describes the context in which Aquinas worked—the rediscovery of Aristotle shortly before, the previous philosophic eclecticism practiced by Christian theologians, and the personal dedication of Aquinas to the vocation of student and teacher of truth about God. According to Gilson's analysis, the relationship of Aquinas to Aristotle is defined by two conditions: first, that Aristotle's philosophy represented for Aquinas the best that reason can do without divine revelation; second, that Aristotle's philosophy nevertheless was not adequate for Aquinas' purposes and needed to be completed by truths Aristotle did not see, a completion that involved basic and far-reaching

* (Editor's Note) Fr. Thomas C. O'Brien's article concluding in this issue offers criticisms of some of the chief substantive consequences of Gilson's concept of Christian Philosophy (p. 431).

modifications. However, having learned what philosophy is from Aristotle, Aquinas was forced to reinterpret previous theological work. In that work, Platonism had been a dominant influence, but the philosophic elements of theology were selected merely according to their suitability to faith, not according to any systematic requirements. Aquinas' entire effort, according to Gilson, was devoted to the study and teaching of Christian truth; the pursuit of philosophic speculation was for him a contemplative approach to God, since he was committed wholly by his vocation to study subservient to sacred doctrine.

In the second chapter, "Sacred Doctrine," Gilson follows the order of the first question of the *Summa theologiae*. In his treatise, however, Gilson does not limit himself to a recapitulation of Aquinas' teaching or to a commentary on it. Gilson emphasizes the necessity in the actual economy of salvation that matters which could be known by natural reason should be revealed. Then Gilson takes the position that natural reason can never grasp in its full application to the God of the Christian faith even those truths which natural reason can establish about God. Gilson argues that a Christian must believe in the existence of the Christian God, although the existence of a Prime Mover or a Necessary Being can be demonstrated. Further, Gilson makes much of Aquinas' metaphorical comparison of sacred doctrine to common sense; he argues that sacred doctrine is at the center of the philosophical disciplines, perceiving their objects, differences, and oppositions, dominating them and uniting them in its own unity. On this basis, Gilson delimits the class of the revealable in such a way that it is all-embracing; it includes all truths known by natural theology, physics, biology, and all other sciences. Toward the end of the chapter, Gilson discusses the various ways in which Aquinas used reason in his theology. According to Gilson, the way Aquinas preferred was to improve the doctrines of the philosophers by bringing them as close as possible to the teaching of true faith; the best contributions by Aquinas to philosophy originated in his reinterpretation of past philosophies in the light of revelation. Gilson's conclusion is that the *Summa*

theologiae is full of philosophy, although everything in it is properly theological inasmuch as it is included within the formal object of theology.

After this treatment of the first element of Christian philosophy, "Revelation and the Christian Teacher," Gilson proceeds in part two to a consideration of God. This part contains three chapters: chapter three, "The Existence of God"; chapter four, "Metaphysical Approaches to the Knowledge of God"; chapter five, "The Essence of God." The three chapters of this part contain about one-third of the entire text of the book; each of the chapters is divided into several sections.

The third chapter follows the order of the second question of the *Summa theologiae*, with the addition of interpretative comment. In describing Aquinas' doctrine on the point that the existence of God is not self-evident, Gilson tells us that Aquinas was not so much interested in particular philosophical doctrines as in pure philosophical positions. Gilson also insists that the actual existence of any object can be experienced or deduced from another actually given existence; he assumes that this position is the only alternative to saying that actual existence can be inferred from a definition. In describing Aquinas' doctrine on the point that the existence of God is demonstrable, Gilson resumes the later statements from the previous point; he interprets a *posteriori* demonstration as an argument proceeding from existence given in experience. However, Gilson insists that the demonstrations of the proposition that God exists require a previously-determined notion of the meaning of the name "God," since this meaning must function as a middle in the proof; moreover, Gilson holds that this notion must be gained from previous knowledge about God. Consequently, demonstrations of the proposition that God exists are merely technical formulations of a knowledge already possessed. Again, Gilson returns to his thesis that the existence of the Christian God is indemonstrable. He argues that those who do not know of it must believe it in any case; moreover, if the existence of the Christian God were demonstrable, the philosophizing theo-

logian would be decreasing his certitude by demonstrating it, since the certitude of faith is greater than that of reason.

In describing Aquinas' doctrine of the five ways, Gilson considers a passage in *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia Dei* which clearly is not a proof for the existence of God and compares it with the passage in chapter four of the *De ente et essentia* which looks very much like a proof of that proposition. Gilson says that critics who have attacked the proof of the *De ente et essentia* have erred, because it was not intended to be a proof that God exists. Gilson next lays down the dictum that in interpreting Aquinas one must not take as a proof for the existence of God any argument he does not expressly formulate to support this conclusion. Gilson then proceeds to lay down three conditions for a genuinely Thomistic proof. First, it must start from some thing or experience empirically given in sense knowledge; it can start from movement or some existing thing, but not from an abstract consideration of the very act of being, since the act of being by which a thing is, is the object of intellect, not of sense. Second, Gilson reports Aquinas' statement that the meaning of "God" is the middle term, but Gilson does not mention that Aquinas gives this condition because the meaning of "God" is derived from an effect, which must function as the middle in the demonstration of the existence of a cause. Third, Gilson insists again that a provisional notion of God must pre-exist the proof. It seems that for Gilson the believer can demonstrate the existence of the Christian God only because he has a proper notion of God beforehand. In his commentary on the five ways and in his additional note on the significance of the five ways, Gilson argues at length that Aquinas has taken up proofs derived from previous thinkers, has purified them, and has united them together by means of his own notion of being.

In the final section of the third chapter, Gilson explains the meaning of the five ways. Having emphasized the historical sources used by Aquinas and having supposed that Aquinas' method here is a reinterpretation of the work of the philoso-

phers, Gilson has the problem of explaining how Aquinas has made the proofs of previous thinkers his own. According to Gilson, this question is most important, since "the very meaning of the use made of philosophy in his theology is at stake" (p. 82). Gilson argues that Aquinas did not need to prove the existence of God, since theology takes the existence of its subject matter for granted. Then Gilson argues that Aquinas did not expect philosophers to prove the existence of the God of Christian theology. Finally, Gilson argues at length that the five ways do not embody any single philosophic viewpoint: "It may not be easy or even possible to encompass all these demonstrations within the limits of one philosophy . . ." (p. 85). Rather, each of the ways gets its full meaning only within the doctrine of Aquinas wherein all of them are considered under the formal object of theology. Gilson concludes the chapter by returning to the comparison of sacred doctrine to common sense; while admitting limits to this metaphor, Gilson insists on its validity in so far as the theologian sees that the determinations of God discovered by irreducibly diverse philosophies belong to a single object known as one only under the higher formality that specifies theological consideration.

Gilson's fourth chapter, "Metaphysical Approaches to the Knowledge of God," is a brief reconstruction of the history of philosophy from the pre-Socratics, through Plato and Aristotle, to Avicenna, based on some texts from Aquinas. (The text that suggests the outline of the chapter is from *De pot.*, q. 3, art. 5.) According to Gilson, this chapter is a metaphysical meditation concerning the nature of God. For Gilson, Aquinas used the history of philosophy for theological ends:

Having always seen philosophical progress as cumulative, he often conceived his own function as that of a theological arbiter of philosophical doctrines. For this very reason, he often practiced a kind of theological criticism of the data provided by the history of philosophy. One can also call this a critical history of philosophy conducted in the light of divine revelation (p. 90).

The point of this chapter, consequently, is twofold. On the one

hand, it provides a historical background for the development of the notion of God as pure act of being. On the other hand, it displays Aquinas' philosophical method as critical history.

Gilson's fifth chapter, "The Essence of God," is divided into four sections. The first of these is an exposition of Aquinas' doctrine concerning the knowability of God; here Gilson follows the order and content of the first two articles of Aquinas' exposition of Boethius' *De trinitate*. In the second section, Gilson expounds Aquinas' doctrine that in God there is absolutely no composition, not even of essence and being, but that God is His own being. Here Gilson raises a difficulty. Inasmuch as Aquinas' demonstrations are sound dialectically, why do they fail to win universal approval? Gilson's answer is that they presuppose Aquinas' proper notion of being as the ultimate act in each thing by which it is. Gilson then notices that not all of Aquinas' arguments rest on this notion. He explains that the properly-Thomistic doctrinal positions rest on Aquinas' own notion of being, but that Aquinas has not systematized his theology around it; rather, he has used many other arguments more acceptable to his contemporaries (pp. 121-122). The point of this section is to show Aquinas' approach to his own notion of being; therefore, Gilson concludes the section by emphasizing the relationship of creature to God as an analogous participation in pure being. In the third section, "He Who Is," Gilson argues that Aquinas did not derive his notion of being from previous philosophers, nor by argument, but from a theological reflection on sacred scripture conducted with full information on the philosophic history of the notion of being. In proving this position, Gilson maintains that the apparent demonstration of the distinction between essence and existence in the *De ente et essentia* is not really a demonstration of this distinction, but only that whatever has an essence and exists does so in virtue of an external cause (pp. 127-128). In the fourth section, "Reflections on the Notion of Being," Gilson argues that the notion of essence is maintained in application to God only to provide a point of reference for the negation

of essence when God is posited as a beyond-essence, or pure act of being.

Following this treatment of God, Gilson proceeds in part three of *Elements of Christian Philosophy* to consider being. This part also contains three chapters: chapter six, "God and the Transcendentals"; chapter seven, "Being and Creation"; and chapter eight, "Being and Causality." This order arises from the fact that Gilson treats the transcendentals primarily as divine names and treats causality as the structuring relationship of the hierarchy of beings, determined according to the mode in which creatures participate analogously in divine being and imitate divine creativity. Three main points fix Gilson's interpretation of Aquinas' doctrine in these three chapters; in each of the chapters, one of them receives its greatest emphasis. In chapter six, Gilson emphasizes his position that inasmuch as Aquinas is a theologian, the only analogy important for him is that of creatures to God. The development of this point makes Gilson's treatment of the transcendentals illustrate his view of the method of negative theology. In chapter seven, Gilson emphasizes his position that for Aquinas all knowledge is theological inasmuch as it concerns the revealable. The development of this point makes Gilson's treatment of creation illustrate his method of determining the meaning of key philosophic notions from positions depending on revealed truths in which they are present. In chapter eight, Gilson emphasizes his position that for Aquinas essence is a possibility for being. The development of this point makes Gilson's treatment of causality illustrate his method of determining the meaning of *esse* by reference to God. The treatment of being in part three thus forms a repetition and extension of the view already presented in part two. The same interpretative framework is filled in a second time, as it were as a test; no alteration is found to be required in it.

Gilson devotes the fourth and final part of the book to four chapters, nine to twelve, concerning man. These chapters correspond more nearly than any of the earlier parts of the book

to work that Gilson has published previously, especially in the *Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*. Even here, however, the interpretation Gilson offers has been developed in accordance with the methods presented in the previous chapters. The effect is most striking in the last chapter; here Gilson applies his view of causality as hierarchical to the relation between man and society, projecting a metaphysics of society that is unprecedented in his earlier work.

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In *Elements of Christian Philosophy* itself (pp. 228-229), Gilson comments on the necessity of reducing metaphysics to a set of syllogistically-linked and systematically-expounded abstract notions in order to make it teachable. In earlier writings, Gilson discussed both the necessity of using textbooks and the problems of teaching metaphysics. In *History of Philosophy and Philosophical Education* (Marquette University Press: Milwaukee, 1948, pp. 12-15), Gilson stated his views about textbooks. For beginners, a compendious course, of which the textbook *ad mentem divi Thomae* is an example, is a necessity. It provides an extrinsic description, which Gilson compared to a map of an unknown country, that is a suitable first contact with philosophy. Gilson also argued that an introductory work of some kind is needed for the personal reading of Aquinas' own works, since they were not written for beginners. He pointed to the tremendous volume and success of such literature for evidence that it really is necessary.

In a lecture delivered at the Aquinas foundation of Princeton University in 1953, Gilson pointed out texts in which Aquinas clearly says that young people cannot learn metaphysics and ethics; moreover, Gilson emphasized that "young" here includes all college and university students. Consequently, Gilson asked himself how Aquinas and his contemporaries studied and taught philosophy. His solution was that Aquinas and his contemporaries did not engage in studying and teaching pure philosophy, but in studying and teaching theology with a good deal of philosophic content, or at least in studying and teaching

philosophy without prescinding from faith and with a view toward theology. While Gilson did not offer any simple or general solution to the problems of teaching metaphysics and ethics, and while he pointed out that the history of philosophy is no easier to understand than philosophy itself, he thought that communication between philosophy professors in Catholic colleges and their students could be improved if philosophy were done more nearly in the manner in which it was done in the *Summa theologiae* itself:

But there is a great deal of straight rational speculation concerning God, human nature, and morality included in the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas. On this precise point, my sole conclusion has been to the effect that, if we wish to introduce Christian students to metaphysics and ethics, to teach them the relevant parts of his theology will be to provide them with the best short cut to some understanding of these disciplines. ("Thomas Aquinas and Our Colleagues," *A Gilson Reader*, ch. 17, ed. A. C. Pegis; Doubleday & Co.: Garden City, Long Island, New York, 1957, p. 292.)

In the light of these statements, made by Gilson himself, *Elements of Christian Philosophy* takes on significance and the criticism of it as a textbook has both greater importance and greater difficulty than it would have otherwise. Moreover, this book is part of a series to be published by Doubleday under the editorship of Professor Pegis. Pegis himself promises an introduction to philosophy and others are preparing a four-volume history of philosophy. Books of readings in paperback format also are planned. If the entire series were available, the question could be posed whether the series could be adopted as a whole. Any judgments made on this book as a textbook considered by itself might be altered significantly in such a consideration. Concerning *Elements of Christian Philosophy* as a textbook, therefore, I offer only tentative criticism. Furthermore, I should like my remarks under this heading to be understood as suggestions for the *consideration* of those thinking of adopting the book for use in undergraduate courses as a required textbook.

The first point to be made in praise of the book is that it has historical sense and that it treats genuine philosophical problems with a degree of complexity adequate to keep them from becoming spurious. In this respect, the book contrasts sharply with the ordinary manual's ineptness in its historical remarks, inaccuracies in its references to philosophical sources, and simple-minded reduction of all problems to visual schemata and verbal manipulation. By this very virtue, however, Gilson seems to have departed from the requirements which he himself set for a textbook, since he is not merely presenting extrinsic description, but is attempting to communicate a grasp on the elements that must be understood for an intrinsic understanding of Aquinas' positions.

Another point that might be argued in favor of the book—this characteristic agrees with Gilson's own requirements for teaching metaphysics to young people—is that it immediately brings to bear notions which students may have acquired in their religious education. Of course, if a teacher considers that a most important point in beginning philosophy is to lead students to understand that it is not what they call "religion," then this aspect of Gilson's effort will be considered a defect; certainly, few teachers could lead many students to see a difference between what Gilson is offering and what is taught in religion courses. A further difficulty arises if a class includes non-Catholic students. Moreover, some may object, even in the case of Catholic students, that the apparent familiarity of the subject matter only will confuse a student who begins with Gilson's book; students may feel that they understand philosophy just as they feel that they understand their faith, although it is clear that they understand neither. One real advantage of attempting to teach metaphysics is that students can discover that they do not understand it and this discovery sometimes can be extended to include a realization that they do not understand the Epistles or the Psalms either. It even happens now and then that faith—aware that it does not understand—begins to seek understanding.

However, I do not think that *Elements of Christian Philosophy* can serve as the basic text for a course in metaphysics preceded only by logic. Gilson assumes much historical background, both because he constantly alludes to ancient and medieval philosophic works for substantive points and because his interpretation of Aquinas makes Aquinas' metaphysical method appear to be a theologically-informed historical criticism of previous philosophy. With a beginning student, fundamental notions—such as potency, essence, substance—cannot be treated lightly; one must do something to convince the student either that he understands these notions or that he cannot understand them. Perhaps *Elements of Christian Philosophy* could be studied after an introduction and a history of ancient and medieval philosophy; if so, the other books of the series to which this one belongs might supply the needed materials.

More serious, however, is that Gilson's book shows how Aquinas' philosophy really is; if such an exposition is to be understood, it must be read against a background of direct acquaintance with Aquinas' works themselves, so that a student at least will know how Aquinas' thought appears to be. Without such a background, a student could not appreciate Gilson's insight into the real meanings which are hidden by what Aquinas actually says, particularly in works such as the *De ente et essentia*. (See pp. 121-122 where Gilson shows that Aquinas' works are full of non-Thomistic arguments; pp. 127-128 where Gilson shows that a central argument of the *De ente et essentia* does not prove what it seems to prove.) Of course, *Elements of Christian Philosophy* could be used in a graduate course; it might be compared with other interpretations of Aquinas' work to illustrate the difficulty of philosophic communication.

Another point against this book is that it is not written clearly. The *Summa theologiae* itself is a model of what I mean by "written clearly," since one has no difficulty in outlining it and no doubt at any point concerning what the question is. Gilson formerly followed this model, but I suggest that anyone

considering using *Elements of Christian Philosophy* as a textbook might try to outline a chapter such as the first or the eighth. Also consider whether prospective students would be able to follow the line of questions. The treatment moves swiftly from substantive questions in metaphysics, to problems of interpretation, to theological issues concerning the function of metaphysics in theology, to historical questions. Considerable attention is devoted to controversies between Gilson and his critics, and the critics are treated in such a way that previous acquaintance with them is necessary to understand Gilson's *apologiae*. Of course, judgments on the clarity of any writing are not likely to receive universal agreement, but it seems to me that most of Gilson's earlier works—*The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* is a good example—are more carefully written and are clearer than this book, although this is his first textbook.

Even deeper than this lack of clarity, however, is the frequent difficulty one has in understanding Gilson in passages in which his statements initially seem clear. There are many passages which convey simply what Gilson does not mean, but which defy positive interpretation. For example, when Gilson raises the question whether the Christian God "is identically the same Whose existence can be demonstrated in five ways" (p. 26), we know immediately that he does not mean that there are many Gods or that the existence of God is not demonstrable. The apparent polytheism certainly is only a manner of speaking, but it is not easy to eliminate this manner of speaking and to express what Gilson is saying. I do not deny that Gilson could do so; I merely doubt that he provides the resources that a student needs. Again, when Gilson speaks of potency as "incomplete actuality considered in its aptitude to achieve a more complete state of actuality" (p. 62), we know that he does not mean to essentialize being and to predicate existence univocally, reducing differences between potentiality and actuality to different degrees of an essential nature of being. But, then, how are such statements to be construed? How would a

student who is not aware of the implication of calling potency "incomplete actuality" understand anything else but what Gilson does not mean? Again, when Gilson says that "the relationship of efficient causality is empirically given in sense experience" (p. 70), we know that he does not intend to reduce cause to action-passion. Gilson certainly would not deny the point on which Aquinas insists, that it is proper to reason to know order and that a knowledge of causes as such is attained in demonstration, not in sense experience (*In I Eth.*, prologus; *In I Post. anal.*, lect. xlii). Still, how would a student understand Gilson otherwise than as maintaining that he finds in his sense experience what Aquinas holds cannot be there? Again, when Gilson says that the notion of being proper to Aquinas is one with the notion of God and refers to God as "the supreme Being *qua* Being" (pp. 85-86), we know that he does not intend his remark to carry the fullness of its pantheistic meaning. But, then, how would a student understand such a remark if he were not aware of the separation Aquinas insists upon between the subject matter of metaphysics and that of sacred doctrine (*In de trin.*, qu. 5, art. 4, c.). *Elements of Christian Philosophy* abounds in similar passages. Does the method of negative theology involve *denying* true propositions (p. 140)? Does essence mean *esse* when we attribute essence to God (p. 138)? Does every knowledge of God require grace (p. 181)? Yet it should be noticed that in many cases Gilson's accurate summaries of Aquinas' explicit doctrine would provide a really attentive and capable student with the means to control his interpretation of such ambiguous or difficult-to-understand statements.

Due to the many-leveled difficulty of *Elements of Christian Philosophy*, I do not believe it can serve as a college textbook. It is too metaphysical to avoid the fact that young people cannot learn metaphysics. Indeed, I do not think there is a genuine solution to this problem. To teach a non-philosophic description of philosophy is possible, but I know of no good reason for doing it. To teach an understandable but pseudo-meta-

physical doctrine is possible; indeed, it was done by the sophists of old and is done still by their modern counterparts. To teach a theology without metaphysics in which matters accessible to reason are emphasized is possible, but an un mutilated theology is much better than a mutilated one. (I do not suggest that Gilson offers a mutilated theology; he presents metaphysical reasoning as well as historical argumentation.) I do not believe the statements of Aquinas concerning the non-teachability of metaphysics to young people can be escaped. If you ask how Aquinas himself was able to learn metaphysics, although he died before he was fifty, my answer is not that he studied theology instead of metaphysics, since I think he studied both and that he could not have accomplished what he did in theology without having accomplished what he did in metaphysics. Rather, I should say that Aquinas' statements concerning the teaching of philosophy are true in general, although they do admit of exceptions. Some important figures in the history of philosophy have been among the exceptions, but most college students are not. I think it is this fact, rather than any innate wrong-headedness, which accounts for the repeated misinterpretations to which Aquinas, together with other great philosophers, has been subjected.

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One aspect of *Elements of Christian Philosophy* that will provoke much discussion is the very view of Christian philosophy which Gilson presents here. The position is not new, since he has been developing it through many years and many works, but his view is developed more fully here than it has been previously. (One recent exposition is: "What is Christian Philosophy?" *A Gilson Reader*, pp. 177-191.) An adequate study of this topic would extend beyond the limits of this article, for it would require familiarity with a vast literature. Moreover, the problems involved in this question are many and difficult; no brief treatment can deal with them. Nevertheless, it may be helpful to indicate here what these problems are and to suggest some points which I think are relevant to their discussion.

In the first place, I think it relevant to recall that Gilson has argued long and effectively against the view that there is nothing philosophically significant in the thought of the middle ages. Against the view that historians of philosophy can ignore the whole medieval period on the ground that it is "only theology," Gilson has shown conclusively that Christian philosophy was a historical reality which ought not to be ignored. Only those who are so dogmatically committed to an anti-religious naturalism that they are willing to reject mountainous evidence against their merely-contentious thesis can deny that philosophy was alive and developing during the middle ages. Moreover, recent research on the works of Aquinas and others, in which Gilson played a leading role, has shown that any philosopher has, on the whole, as much to learn from his medieval predecessors as he has to learn from the ancients and from the moderns. In short, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* and the *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* proved their central thesis. However, Gilson's present thesis concerning Christian philosophy goes beyond his amply-demonstrated earlier position.

In the second place, I think it relevant to recall that Gilson has solid ground for maintaining the need for attention to the theological character of the *Summa theologiae* and the other theological works of Aquinas. No adequate interpretation can ignore the determining character of the work it interprets; to extract selections from Aquinas' works and to rearrange them in an order he never used, supplying connecting links he never required, and directing them to purposes he never envisaged surely is to construct a philosophy out of Aquinas' dead words, not to understand the philosophy in Aquinas' living communication. Whatever is the way in which one can learn philosophy from the *Summa theologiae*, one cannot learn it by pretending that the treatise on the unity of God has nothing to do with the treatise on the Trinity, or by pretending that the quotation from sacred scripture often given in the *sed contra* has nothing to do with the argument presented in the *respondeo*. Moreover, although the question of Aquinas' commentaries on Aristotle

is a complicated one that must be treated sentence by sentence, not once for all, I think it is correct to say that these commentaries cannot be identified with Aquinas' philosophy and that they cannot be used to control the interpretation of Aquinas' other works in the same way that the other works can be used to control each other's interpretation. A statement in a commentary is a comment unless it reveals itself to be a more direct expression of its author's thought; comments reveal their author's thought only as a function of what is commented upon.

In the third place, I think it important to notice that it is legitimate to call Christian faith itself "Christian Philosophy," as Gilson has stated ("What is Christian Philosophy?" *A Gilson Reader*, pp. 177-179). This mode of expressing ourselves is honored by tradition and it agrees with the current use of "philosophy" to designate the most basic and far-reaching principles determining the view of life and reality that one holds, regardless of the ground on which it is held. In this sense, everyone has a philosophy of life, and the Christian's philosophy is his faith. But Gilson means more than this, or something other than this, when he writes "Christian philosophy."

In the fourth place, it is important to notice that it is legitimate to call any use of reason or borrowing from its proper works a "Christian philosophy" in so far as it contributes to the elaboration of a theology. This designation is well-grounded in the Leonine restoration, as Gilson has said ("What is Christian Philosophy?" *A Gilson Reader*, pp. 186-187; p. 191, n. 10). Moreover, this manner of speaking agrees with another current use of "philosophy," which sometimes designates the rational elaboration of any set of beliefs—for example, "conservative philosophy," "business philosophy," and "the American philosophy." In this sense, every theology and ideology is a philosophy, for each presents a clarification, systematization, and apologetic for a faith, without the beliefs ceasing thereby to be beliefs. However, Gilson means something different from this too, for he distinguishes between philosophy and theology in a way that this use of "philosophy" does not. Moreover,

the topics and manner of *Elements of Christian Philosophy* are not the ones a theologian would use. (See Gilson's explanation—*Elements*, pp. 309-310—for treating the transcendentals in the order: one, true, good.) If Gilson had treated theological topics in a theological mode, it would be clear that he meant to advocate that Christians should study theology and that they should not study philosophy apart from integral theology. But Gilson's position cannot be simplified in this way. For Gilson, "Christian philosophy" designates a rational elaboration of the revealable which is knowable by natural reason; thus it can be compared to non-Christian philosophies in its subject matter but cannot be compared to them in its point of view. *Elements of Christian Philosophy* reveals many vestiges of Gilson's wrestling with the historical phenomenon of philosophical pluralism; Gilson's notion of Christian philosophy itself bears such imprints most clearly.

In the fifth place, it seems to me that it is a mistake to argue against Gilson that faith ought to be only a negative norm for Christian philosophy. A Christian philosopher is not hindered by his faith, but helped by it. He cannot philosophize as though he had no faith, nor would it be reasonable to try or to pretend to do so. Faith does not provide a merely negative norm for philosophy; in fact, in a way it cannot provide a negative norm, since a philosopher as philosopher must accept evidence and judge according to it. Consequently, a philosopher must be willing to discard any belief if it should prove false. (Notice that the beliefs of a Christian philosopher, even if they pertain to matters of Christian faith, can and do prove false, since even assuming that the Christian faith is true, material heresy does occur. Incautious application of the norm of faith often has led to positions inconsistent with faith itself or inconsistent with evidence that is completely concordant with faith. Whenever a serious Christian thinker meets an apparent conflict between what he believes and what he thinks evidence requires, he asks himself at least three questions: 1. Is there a conflict? 2. Does my belief really belong to the Christian faith? 3. Does

this judgment really follow necessarily from the evidence?) At the same time, a Christian philosopher benefits not only by having revealed to him for serious philosophic consideration many truths he would not discover otherwise, but also by being stimulated by the needs of theology to develop the potentiality of reason as fully as possible within its natural competence without subverting it to technical, practical, or game-like ends. Moreover, a Christian philosopher may receive from Christian life an integration of personality without which intellectual development is extremely difficult or impossible. Thus, even if Gilson's notion of Christian philosophy should be rejected, it seems to me that there is a meaning for "Christian philosophy" which goes beyond saying that philosophy has been taught by Christians and that it does not conflict with Christian faith.

In the sixth place, I do not think one can argue from a philosopher—either in his psychological, historical, or social conditions—to his philosophy without falling into serious errors. Gilson seems to attempt such an argument in *Elements of Christian Philosophy* (ch. 1, esp. pp. 19-21; p. 283, n. 11). Clearly, one cannot abstract from an author in interpreting his communications; one cannot abstract from the personality of a thinker in considering his acts of thinking; one cannot abstract from the motives of one who assents in criticizing the content of his beliefs or opinions; one cannot abstract from the mind that does not know in examining the limits of its knowledge. The impossibility of these abstractions renders plausible doctrines which maintain the relativity of truth to psychological, historical, and social conditions. However, one must abstract from psychological, historical, and social conditions in grasping the evident and in demonstrating scientific knowledge by reduction to evidence. Otherwise, there is no such knowledge; moreover, if there were any, it could not be communicated, since the conditions of different knowers are never precisely the same.

"Knowledge" is ambiguous, since it refers either to an act

of knowing or to what is known precisely in so far as it is known. If I understand Gilson's position, he ignores this ambiguity. If the ambiguity were taken into account, it seems to me it would be clear that philosophic knowledge itself cannot be characterized from the historical conditions in which it is developed, from the personality and motivations of the one who develops it, or from social requirements—even from the requirements of the Church in its teaching of sacred doctrine. It is clear that Aquinas' personality was relevant to his philosophizing; it is equally clear that Aquinas' personality was irrelevant to what he philosophized. (The impersonality of Aquinas' style is a sign of what he wished to convey.) Even if the philosophy Aquinas philosophized were expressed only in his theological works, still if it could be found there at all, it would have to be discovered by extrapolating from statements made in the theological context the subject matter, method, principles, and internal ends of the philosophy itself.

Moreover, if philosophy cannot be transformed by theology unless it is constituted in itself by all that it requires to be philosophy—as I think and shall explain next—then the only way to understand the philosophy in a theology is by considering the conditions required by the philosophy itself in abstraction, but not separation or precision, from its theological transformation. I do not believe Professor Gilson makes such an attempt, for the simple reason that he does not think it necessary. Indeed, the understanding of philosophy is not necessary for history, which can rest in a consideration of human actions and communication, but it is necessary for the dialectic which uses what others have philosophized to further philosophy, since the philosophy which is philosophized is not a human action or communication but is an ordered group of *verba intellecta*, which generally is called “a philosophic view.” (This metaphor is misleading, however, since philosophic knowledge and the viewpoint from which a philosopher knows are identical; one cannot have or use a philosophic point of view without having a philosophized philosophy. I do not think that revela-

tion can substitute for a philosophic point of view, because in so far as a truth is accepted on the authority of revelation, the intellect is not determined by the evidence of the object itself; nevertheless, given a philosophic point of view, other truths which are relevant to it, although they remain inevident, may be integrated with it.)

In the seventh place, I do not think that a philosophy can be of use to theology unless it is constituted in itself by all that is required of it to be philosophy. Gilson seems to be arguing in *Elements of Christian Philosophy* that it can (pp. 130-133). According to his argument, the Thomistic distinction between essence and existence cannot be demonstrated without presupposing the properly-Thomistic notion of being, and that notion must have been attained first in interpreting the divine revelation, "I am Who am"; thereupon Thomistic metaphysics became possible and began. Gilson has argued (pp. 127-128) that the apparent demonstration of the distinction in the *De ente et essentia* (ch. 4), really is not a demonstration of it at all. It seems to me that the context of this passage reveals a radical difference between it and the argument of Avicenna to which Gilson wishes to assimilate it. Further, although this argument is in a way similar to dialectical argumentation, I do not think it is dialectical; rather, it is an example of the metaphysical method which Aquinas himself explicitly describes and distinguishes from dialectic (*In de trin.*, qu. 6, art. 1 [a], c.). If Gilson's argument concerning the derivation of the distinction between essence and existence were sound, then perhaps it would follow that Aquinas utilized in his theology a metaphysics which was not constituted in itself except in virtue of that use, for the distinction does permeate Aquinas' metaphysical thought.

Now, it certainly is true that one can begin to study metaphysics while attempting to understand what one believes. One need not be personally interested in knowing metaphysics for its own sake in the sense that he orders this knowledge to no further end. Nor need a theologian first form a complete meta-

physics, only afterwards beginning to use it in his theology. Moreover, it is evident that no one need devote himself to expounding philosophy; we should hardly expect that Aquinas, who was committed to teaching theology, should have done so. Finally, it is true that revelation, Christian teaching, and the Christian's immediate religious experience are thoroughly integrated with other sources of knowledge, mediate and immediate, in the genesis of a Christian's thought; in his intellectual development, notions are formed, truths learned, and knowledge is organized without the distinction among sources being noticed. The distinction between philosophy and theology is drawn by a Christian only after he has followed a *via inquisitionis* relevant to both of them. Nevertheless, it does not seem to me that philosophy can be used in the light of faith to develop a science of theology unless that philosophy has in itself what is required for it to be philosophy. Philosophy need not be presented standing by itself, but it must be able to stand by itself. Even in respect to the psychological genesis of the notion of being, it does not seem to me that anyone would interpret God's revelation of His proper name as Aquinas interpreted it unless he had in advance the notion of being which Aquinas had, since others did interpret it with other valid interpretations. (Although this matter involves theological considerations which are beyond my competence, it may not be impertinent to raise the question whether any new simple notion can be acquired from revelation. If the answer is affirmative, a further question might be how interpretations involving such notions could be validated.)

My contention is that the *via resolutionis* required by philosophy as philosophy is not merely a matter of style or order of presentation, but that it is essential to the constitution of philosophy. Although sacred doctrine rightly treats all things considered by all human sciences, it cannot include all *verba intellecta* attained by all human sciences. On this ground, I disagree with Gilson's statement: "In short, that which is known of God to the philosopher *qua* philosopher is also known

to the theologian *qua* theologian" (p. 38). Of course, the theologian knows of God all that the philosopher knows of Him and more, but the theologian cannot know *qua* theologian what the philosopher knows *qua* philosopher, unless there is no distinction between the two knowledges. The distinction, of course, is formal, but it is not merely verbal; formal distinctions are distinctions among cognitive contents that cannot be ignored without error. Thus, God's essence is His existence, but "essence" does not mean existence, even in predications concerning God. In short, I think that in his treatment of the relation between theology and philosophy, Gilson consistently ignores the distinction between knowledges and things; the fact that sacred doctrine treats all things does not imply that it includes all knowledges. Although it is true that Aquinas was not concerned about this point for the protection of the integrity of philosophy, we must be concerned about it if we seek from Aquinas any philosophy or aid to philosophy other than the philosophy in his very texts just as it is found in them. Gilson remarks: "It is somewhat distressing that the same men who preach that grace can make a man a morally better man refuse to admit that revelation can make a philosophy a better philosophy" (p. 283, n. 11). I would not deny that philosophy is assisted by revelation, but I think the strict parallelism which Gilson assumes is false, since a philosophy is not *in rerum natura* and the structure of the intentional realm is not identical with that of reality, except on Platonic assumptions which Aquinas repeatedly rejects.

In the eighth place, I do not think that a criticism of the history of philosophy in the light of divine revelation is a philosophic method; moreover, I do not think that philosophic development occurs without the use of a philosophic method. Gilson seems to think otherwise. He characterizes Aquinas' procedure as follows: "For this very reason, he often practiced a kind of theological criticism of the data provided by the history of philosophy" (p. 90). Gilson previously had used this view to account for Aquinas' presentation of the five ways (pp. 42

and 85). Again, he says: "The most original part of the contribution made by Thomas Aquinas to philosophy has its origin in this rational reinterpretation of the philosophies of the past in the light of theological truth" (p. 41).

Now, it is true that Aquinas used the results of previous philosophy in the course of his theological work. The question is whether Aquinas did not achieve a philosophic advance upon what his predecessors had done by having a better, or at least different, philosophic method and by using its results to criticize the results of the methods others had used. To be sure, it is possible for a theologian to criticize philosophy and to reinterpret it rationally in the light of divine revelation without having a philosophic method. He can proceed with nothing but faith and dialectic. The outcome of such a procedure is a type of theology that always has been prevalent; it borrows from philosophies in an eclectic manner. It is also true that a theologian who has a philosophical method and who uses it constantly need not reveal that method in his theological works. To suppose otherwise would be to confuse philosophy and theology with their symbolic manifestation in language. I hesitate to say that Gilson has fallen into this confusion.

Nevertheless, if the two *Summae* were Aquinas' only works, how could we understand his metaphysics? Fortunately, these theological masterpieces are not his only works. We have his *De ente et essentia* and we have his exposition of Boethius' *De trinitate*. In these works, I think that Aquinas wrote a metaphysics and explained in a clear and exact manner what metaphysics is and what its method is. On the principle of interpretation that an *ex professo* treatment takes precedence over all others, I think these works should provide the point of departure for any attempt to explicate Aquinas' metaphysics. I object to Gilson's account of Aquinas' metaphysics because he has not given sufficient weight to the *De ente et essentia*, because he has not treated it as a whole and interpreted it systematically, and because he has ignored Aquinas' treatment of the nature and method of metaphysics in his exposition of Boethius' *De trinitate*.

* * *

In view of Gilson's tremendous contribution to the work of the Leonine restoration, I am sure there will be many who will attempt to follow his interpretation of Aquinas' metaphysics of existence and doctrine concerning philosophic knowledge of God as far as possible, while parting with him on the question of Christian philosophy. Yet for Gilson himself, his notion of Christian philosophy is fundamental to his understanding of Aquinas' entire teaching. I think it would be a sign of disrespect for Gilson's competence to suppose that his interpretations on substantive points can be detached from his thesis concerning the relation between revelation and philosophy in Aquinas' work. Without his notion of Christian philosophy, we must ask ourselves, how plausible is Gilson's interpretation of the requirements for a proof of the proposition that God exists? How true to Aquinas is his notion of essence, a notion he claims is maintained in respect to God only to provide a reference-point for knowing God as a super-essential pure act of being? In answering these questions we must remember that they are closely related to Gilson's treatment of all the key metaphysical topics: potency, existence, analogy, causality, and the transcendentals. In every case one must assume the coherence of Gilson's interpretation unless there is cogent evidence for denying it, for Gilson himself forms the connections with plausible lines of reasoning.

Furthermore, if we find that we must reject Gilson's notion of Christian philosophy, then it seems to me we must find also that the mode of interpretation he has followed is not adequate to the task he has undertaken. The task set us by Leo XIII included two elements: to restore Christian philosophy and to augment it. It seems evident to me that a purely historical procedure is not adequate to accomplish the second part of this task. But it seems to me also that a complete restoration of the achievements of the great scholastics cannot occur unless we learn to philosophize from the very beginning of philosophy with the methods and principles they used. Our office as philosophers is not to restore St. Thomas Aquinas; only God can

restore him come judgment day. Rather, our office is to restore the order of truth he achieved by achieving it ourselves. History necessarily considers every statement in relation to its author and his contingent conditions; therefore, history inevitably reduces all knowledge to opinion or transforms it into faith. Consequently, a purely historical procedure not only restrains us from considering the new problems or new forms of old problems which have arisen since the thirteenth century, but even prohibits us from attaining fully the demonstrative knowledge to which Aquinas and others attained. Without such a full attainment, we shall fail to fulfill the task Leo XIII pointed out to us, a task even more urgent today than it was one hundred years ago.

I do not suggest that we should represent the work of Aquinas otherwise than it was in order to make his philosophy attractive to our contemporaries. Philosophy is not apologetics and rhetoric is not demonstration; we ought not to consider our work from the point of view of rhetoric, since false opinions always can be made more attractive than demonstrated truths. We must enter into full communication with other contemporary philosophers only because such communication is an inherent attribute of our human way of learning. At the same time, we should continue to learn from Aquinas to imitate fully the method with which he philosophized; if we do learn his method, we shall become able to present the truths he knew as truths to be known in the light of evidence, not merely as opinions to be maintained out of loyalty to a tradition. What is important for philosophy is not what men have said, but the truths which things require us to think of them.

Nor do I suggest that we should abandon historical study of the works of Aquinas; such study always will be valuable, since it is a necessary although insufficient condition for attaining a knowledge of things such as he attained. I am maintaining only that the meanings of "historical" and "existential" ought not to be confused and that one cannot know Aquinas' philosophy without knowing things as he knew them. Since it is

only natural for history to attempt to proceed in the opposite direction, history as such is an insufficient discipline for learning philosophy. The texts of Aquinas belong in the most prominent place in the dialectical introduction to our philosophizing, but to know philosophic subject matters as Aquinas knew them, we must use the method he used and begin from the principles from which his philosophy began.

The argument of the *De ente et essentia* is involved very peculiarly with logic; moreover, one method appropriate to metaphysics is called "rational," inasmuch as metaphysics properly begins from principles taught by logic (*In de trin.*, qu. 6, art. 1 (a), c.). Yet Aquinas' logic remains ignored almost totally. An incapacity to achieve demonstrative knowledge of a subject matter from the study of works of those who have attained such knowledge is no fault of historical method, but it does show want of training in logic; consequently, it seems to me that the time has come to study logic and to rediscover the metaphysical method which Aquinas used. Aquinas' act of philosophizing cannot be understood apart from history, but what he philosophized cannot be restored without logic; the method of metaphysics is not a theological use of history. If Aquinas' logic were studied and the method of his metaphysics were acquired, perhaps the *De ente et essentia* could be understood. If the *De ente et essentia* were understood, I think it might become clear to us how Aquinas' notion of being was formed and how he became capable of interpreting "He Who Is" in a new way.

Professor Gilson has made many great contributions to our understanding of medieval philosophy. *Elements of Christian Philosophy* no doubt is an important work; it deserves to be studied and discussed thoroughly. I have commented upon it in a manner that I hope will encourage careful reading and stimulate serious discussion. Professor Gilson's tremendous scholarship, brilliant insight, and intellectual integrity appear on every page of this work, but all of us have become accustomed to expect of him a measure of these qualities which would

startle us if we found evidence of it in the work of lesser men. Without the work of Professor Gilson and without the teaching he has carried on—not only of his auditors, but also of the readers of his many published works—none of us would be able to do what needs to be done next. I do not claim to see clearly the priority of logic to history in the method of metaphysics. I merely suspect what we might see if we stand upon the shoulders of this giant—Etienne Gilson.

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