New Blackfriars

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Herbert McCabe's Realism

Matthew Ian Dunch SJ

Abstract

This paper defends Herbert McCabe OP against anti-realist charges, particularly Francesca Murphy's extended criticisms of McCabe as a 'Story Thomist'. McCabe stands accused of reading Thomas Aquinas, in part through Wittgenstein, such that concern for method and language displaces concern for God. Rather, McCabe's story is one of God raising up human beings so that their language and activities develop as they grow in divine life. Beginning with his account of religious obedience, I argue that McCabe is a realist sensitive to the journey of finite creatures towards the mystery of God. Developing in divine life is not primarily informational, but is an entering into the mystery of God so as to share in God's own self-knowledge, a knowledge that humans cannot claim to possess on their own terms. McCabe's Wittgensteinian-inflected Thomism embraces the real gift of divine self-knowledge and the ongoing development of human language and activities in receiving this gift.

Keywords

Grammatical Thomism, Herbert McCabe, Realism, Wittgenstein, Obedience

Herbert McCabe was first and foremost a student of Thomas Aquinas and, secondarily, Ludwig Wittgenstein. Critics, most notably Francesca Murphy, have charged that his reading of Wittgenstein undermines the realism of Thomas. This charge is misguided. McCabe's is a developmental realism of growth in the reality of God. Predications about God are founded upon relationship with God—his realism is developmental insofar as it serves and is premised upon this developing relationship. McCabe's care with the limits of predication is not anti-realism reducing God to a mere 'story' in Murphy's terms. For McCabe, 'God matters' above all else; therefore, speaking clearly about God and avoiding 'nonsense' matters, as one grows in love of God and neighbor. This paper traces McCabe's realism beginning from the vantage of McCabe as preacher and teacher. The paper then turns to Murphy's criticism

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of McCabe, particularly his reading of the Five Ways and devotion to 'method'. The paper concludes by arguing that insofar as McCabe is drawn to method, it is a pedagogical method for speaking about God and growing in relationship with God in community. McCabe does not reduce God to a story but provides intellectual help to avoid speaking nonsense about what matters.

Obedience and Shared Understanding

McCabe's talk on 'Obedience' to the Dominican Sisters at Rosary Priory, which was subsequently published in *New Blackfriars,* shows McCabe as the consummate teacher and suggests a wider developmental realism in McCabe as opposed to a fixed ontology.[1] Since McCabe is accused of using method to move away from realism about God, it seems fitting to start with one of the methods of religious life as a concrete and actionable way to God that also develops one's understanding of God, though refuses to fix it this side of the eschaton. McCabe is sensitive to the way in which the method or structure of obedience could become a limitation on one's engagement with God and reality but when properly understood and lived becomes the means for developing in the love of God and community.

McCabe's talk to the sisters begins by addressing the *prima facie* conflict between religious obedience and freedom—that is the conflict between the subject's and the superior's will. The simple picture of obedience is hierarchical. The superior gives commands to the subject in such a way that the subject might execute those commands. Hopefully, the superior is correct in her commands, and the good subject comprehends enough to understand what must be done and bends to this higher authority. Further, these commands are only necessary because of the fallenness of the world resulting in the inevitable conflict of wills. McCabe offers a less adversarial vision of obedience. He rejects that obedience is the triumph of the superior's will over the subject's will. Underlying this opposition is an understanding of the self as opposed to the community, where obedience is a form of subjugation of one will to another. Specifically, he rejects the assumption that either will is fully formed unto itself and has some special integrity in this, if not isolation, then at least autonomy robustly conceived. Thus, in obedience one will necessarily deforms another. McCabe writes: 'this idea of the individual, which forms the very basis of our society, the society we are prepared to defend with nuclear missiles, is completely mythical; there are no such animals'.[2] Neither St Dominic nor St Thomas

[1] Herbert McCabe, 'Obedience', *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 65, no. 768, 1984, pp. 280–287.
[2] McCabe, 'Obedience', p. 281.

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Aquinas would recognize their own understandings of human willing nor of obedience in an adversarial picture of individuals set against one another. Obedience presumes human beings as essentially social animals able to identify, negotiate, and share goods in common.

McCabe contrasts what he takes to be modern assumptions around obedience with the Dominican tradition of obedience expressed in Thomas: '*imperium*, the act of commanding or ordering, is not an act of the will but of the intelligence (though of course it presupposes the will). It is the act of one who understands what is to be done'. McCabe reminds the sisters, 'You must have heard a thousand times that *obedire* comes from *ob-audire*, to listen'.[3] Such listening strives to understand. Obedience involves sharing the language of another such that she can be heard and understood. Mere compulsion diminishes both the superior and the subject because the act of communication is limited to a bare understanding of compliance. The superior orders the subject to do x and the subject grudgingly accepts, not knowing why. Though sometimes obedience must function by compulsion because of sin or simply immaturity, this is a defective form of obedience. An obedience of compulsion reduces the relationship between superior and subject to something mechanical rather than something human much less something aiming towards the divine. Such obedience conceives of the subjects as extensions of the superior.

For Thomas and McCabe, reason is public and expressed in language; this is a central point in McCabe's thought. Obedience is a sharing of public reason for the good of the community. McCabe articulates a high, and perhaps rarely realized, ideal: 'Obedience only becomes perfect when the one who commands and the one who obeys come to share one mind'.[4] Obedience is judged by the depth of listening and understanding more than by the deference of will. McCabe understands obedience as a means by which both superior and subjects come to a mutual understanding and coordination of the shared good of the community.

For McCabe, the dynamic between superior and subject is similar the dynamic between teacher and student. When education functions properly the student shares in the mind of the teacher. This happens over the course of years, the child in the classroom cannot understand as the teacher does and, for her own education, must obey through deference on the way to obeying through understanding; so too the novice in a community. For a teacher simply to impose answers on the student, to retain an epistemic imbalance indefinitely is to defeat the purpose of teaching. McCabe observes: 'The job of the superior is not to make her or his will prevail, it is to play the central role in an educational

[3] McCabe, 'Obedience', p. 282.
[4] McCabe, 'Obedience', p. 282.

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process by which the good for the house becomes clear to everyone, including her. Our motto, remember, is Veritas: Truth'.[5] The process or method of community governance, of masters, provincials, and priors is to understand the truth of the community and its mission, which must ultimately mean learning about the world and the place of the community in the world. Above all, community is formed to seek after God and God's call to the community so that one can be obedient to Christ in the community and share Christ's obedience to the Father. The faith that enlivens the community is communal—it is a shared understanding. Community itself with its very structures, its methods, is a way to God. McCabe concludes: 'So learning to live in community, learning genuine obedience, is the exploration of God'.[6] The developing shared understanding of the community is an exploration of God. A community explores the divine life through the practices of their human lives together forged and taught by obedience. This is a communal and developmental realism of the experience of God that ongoingly forms the language for exploring God.

Though communities may come to a shared understanding with their human superiors over time, obedience to Christ is never properly understood. 'Now, because our obedience, our solidarity in the community, is no mere human thing but a sharing into this mystery, it is also true both that the community is greater than I, and that I and the community are one. The dynamism of obedience, the common life of the community, is the dynamism of the Trinity'.[7] The process of coming to understand Christ and Christ's call in a community is necessarily incomplete short of the eschaton. This is another core insight in McCabe's thought: the robust engagement of human beings in the reality of God precisely through, not despite, acknowledging and reverencing the mystery of God. Community and more broadly humanity is immersed in the graced task of obedience to Christ, a task which remains a mystery, unaccountable in human terms. This is a difficult task that demands human sacrifice and ongoing striving for the will of God as a community. As he writes, 'It takes a lot more trouble for everybody, and needs a lot more patience from everybody, to create a community which comes to a common mind than simply to set up a chain of command and persuade people to do as they are told because that makes life easier for them. It is a lot more trouble but it makes a real obedience possible, and this is the eternal life of the Holy Spirit'.[8] The striving for shared understandings does not make the Holy Spirit understandable, but is an immersive and demanding response to the Spirit. True obedience is found in seeking the Spirit across that wide spectrum

[5] McCabe, 'Obedience', p. 283.
[6] McCabe, 'Obedience', p. 287.
[7] McCabe, 'Obedience', p. 287.
[8] McCabe, 'Obedience', p. 287.

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along with the rest of the community, which is a difficult task. Communities form individuals over time to the ongoing and, indeed, eschatological task of real obedience. Though noting the difficulties, McCabe view of the power of religious communities to come to share the same reason is notably optimistic.

In the talk, McCabe briefly recounts his own formation in community. He writes that the 'process of growing up and developing the personality I have was the process of being brought into, having a role in a whole succession of communities'.[9] The formation of various communities brought McCabe to the life's work of teaching and, relatedly, preaching. When understood properly, the roles of the teacher and superior converge. The teacher helps forms people in a common understanding, a common language. The teacher of theology forms common understanding of Christ, again like a superior albeit in a different mode.

Obedience to Christ and finding ways of speaking about Christ within community was deeply informed by but extended beyond the confines of his Dominican community to various other communities. McCabe took his teacher's sensibility to his work as editor of *New Blackfriars*. In his first issue as editor, he described the journal's task as cultivating relationships, retaining old friends, and building new friendships 'as a contribution to a living debate that concerns us all'.[10] The journal itself formed a certain kind of community, or at least sought to support certain kinds of communities.

McCabe sets out his project in *God Matters,* and much of his wider writings, as an exercise in teaching what matters and avoiding what leads one astray. What matters according to McCabe is: 'That the only God who matters is the unfathomable mystery of love because of which there is being and meaning to anything else that is'. And that 'we are united with God in matter, in our flesh and his flesh'.[11] Surely any superior should desire a similar understanding of unfathomable mystery for those under obedience. For McCabe, being united to God in Dominican community in his case, or other communities in which one finds oneself, and more widely in the Church being formed in community concretely matters because God matters. McCabe also sets two targets, two ways of thinking that run counter to what matters. One, 'that we can speculate about what sort of being God is (and even how he should behave)', and, two, 'That our link with God is an especially non-bodily or "mental" affair'. McCabe takes himself to be following his great teacher and confrere, Thomas Aquinas, both in what matters and what runs counter to what matters. These targets are not clarifications of metaphysics nor linguistic nicety but counter confusions that also matter because they disturb formation in the mystery of

[9] McCabe, 'Obedience', p. 284.
[10] Herbert McCabe, 'Comment', *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 46, no. 532, 1964, p. 3.
[11] Herbert McCabe, *God Matters*, (Continuum: London, 2010), . p. v.

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love that matters above all else. Central to McCabe's project is to avoid saying ridiculous things about what matters.

McCabe's resistance to speculation about what sort of being God is raises more than a little suspicion. He is after all a teacher in an order that strives to hand down the fruits of its contemplations to others, '*Contemplata aliis tradere*'.[12] Refusing to speculate seems to truncate what can be handed down to add a methodological millstone to the necks of the friars as the go out to preach. Herein lies a concern: would McCabe stop those who would speak about God from staying something important or true? Does his caution about speaking of God, about speculating about what sort of a being God is, truncate or distort religious speech? Various critiques raise such concerns explicitly and implicitly against McCabe, namely, that McCabe is undermining what matters by setting a roadblock because his approach to what matters is in thrall to a method that undermines what matters. While Thomas himself cautions against positive predications of God, McCabe is accused of going far beyond Thomas. I focus on what may be the most extensive such critique, that of Francesca Aran Murphy.

Murphy's Criticism

Murphy devotes a considerable portion of her *God is Not a Story: Realism Revisited* to critiquing McCabe. Though McCabe has other critics, for example Christopher Insole in his *The Realist Hope*, Murphy to her credit, engages with McCabe's texts in an extended fashion which is not the case in many other critiques of McCabe, though she only draws from two collections, *God Matters* and *God Still Matters*.[13] Murphy groups McCabe with David Burrell and Denys Turner as what she calls a 'grammatical Thomist'. She takes these grammatical Thomists, along with the 'story Thomist' Robert Jensen and 'story Barthians' George Lindbeck and Hans Frei, as offering movie-like narrative theologies that deracinate theology from reality by devotion to method.

'Realism' and 'anti-realism' are comparative rather than absolute terms. One can be a realist about certain types of entities and not others. As various authors have noted, Thomas Aquinas himself is anti-realist by some Platonic standards, as the Franciscan tradition and Étienne Tempier, Bishop of Paris responsible for the 1277 condemnation of Aristotelianism, were eager to point out. Despite this, Thomas has been recruited as a partisan in pro-realist argument since at least the nineteenth century. Certainly, he was a realist about the existence of

[12] ST III.40.1 ad 2.

[13] Christopher J. Insole, *The Realistic Hope: a Critique of Anti-Realist Approaches in Contemporary Philosophical Theology*

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God and the world. Murphy seems to take up the nineteenth century reading of Thomas as a partisan against anti-realists, though this is not a position Thomas would have contemplated.

Murphy offers a complicated and interweaving history of grammatical Thomism So, it is difficult to precisely disambiguate her critique of McCabe from other grammatical Thomists. McCabe would be surprised to learn that he was a grammatical Thomist, especially as one who self-consciously avoided consigning himself to a school of thought. Murphy writes: 'grammatical Thomism' is a way 'of thinking about […] Thomas Aquinas in which method becomes the very content of [the grammatical Thomists'] theology'.[14] Murphy's objection is not to method, even Thomas can be said to have a method of sorts, but to what she takes to be the primacy of method over a realist metaphysics. One can apply a method to an underlying reality. Murphy's objection is that method cannot dictate the scope of reality or catch one in the trap of merely talking about talking. Thus, it may be right to observe that Thomas is concerned with the grammar of predicates of God, but wrong to let grammar rules determine what one might say about God, at least on Murphy's view. The grammatical Thomist extracts a few methodological concerns from the Angelic Doctor and gives them a place of primacy excluding Thomas's wider thought in the process. Method, thus ascendent, collapses the realism of theological speech within methodological bounds. Murphy writes: 'narrative theologies offer a pre-verbal machination of the reality, providing the materials for an abstraction of essence, not for the concretization of an image. Since such cognitive acts do not set the perceiver free to love another as another, narrative theologies substitute a methodology for the personal love of God'.[15] The technology of method, in Murphy's telling, blocks the way to God.

Étienne Gilson looms large in Murphy's vision of what constitutes a proper Thomist; Gilson is cited throughout *God is Not a Story*. Her admiration of Gilson is made even more explicit in her recent 'Thomism 1870–1962' in the *Handbook of Catholic Theology*. Murphy begins her piece on Thomism with Gilson's vision of 'the great Thomist family'.[16] Gilson defines membership in this family as such 'who does not like to believe what he can know, and who never pretends to know what he can but believe and yet a man whose faith and knowledge grow

[14] Francesca Aran Murphy, *God is Not a Story: Realism Revisited*, (Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 93; McCabe, *God Matters*, p. 43.

[15] Murphy, *God is Not a Story*, p. 23.

[16] Francesca Aran Murphy, 'Thomism 1870–1963', in Lewis Ayres and Medi Ann Volpe (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Catholic Theology*, (Oxford University Press, March 2019), pp. 652–670.

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in organic unity because they spring from the same divine source'.[17] Though maintaining the distinction between natural reason and revelation, this Thomist family points to a seamless connection between the two rooted in an underlying reality. The organic unity of faith and reason, this is precisely what the primacy of method is meant to disrupt in the case of natural reason and revelation, because they are two different modes of speaking about God that method treats differently, thus disturbing an underlying realism.

Method analyzing our ways of knowing God blocks the way to God. Murphy writes: 'These questions, such as how we speak about God, reflect methodological concerns. The principle, "God is a story" is set to work the moment one equates one's method of knowing God—such as Scripture—with God as such'. God as such must be prior to the mode of knowing God. Murphy continues invoking Gilson: 'As Gilson remarked, "Whoever sticks a finger into the machinery of the Cartesian method must expect to be dragged along its whole course". The "Cartesian" element in all narrative theologies is that method is their starting point'.[18] The accusation is that McCabe along with the other grammatical Thomists are committed to method that, like Descartes's method, cuts them off from reality. For Murphy, McCabe's first target, 'that we can speculate about what sort of being God is (and even how he should behave)' becomes a methodological blinder in McCabe's hands, though not in Thomas'.

Murphy frequently invokes a cinematic metaphor to illustrate the constraints of method, 'The most which such a cinematic belief in God can deliver to Christian theology is an account of how thought, feeling, imagination, and belief function within it'.[19] Method moves theology from the three-dimensional interactive world of reality to the carefully curated but flat world of the screen. Within method one can present a story but one that is constrained to the limits of a philosophical technology ill-suited to the reality it is meant to portray.

McCabe does not take himself to be truncating experience nor understanding God through method but using certain methods to allow growth in relationship with God. Method is like obedience in community; when used properly it is an aid to growth. Murphy is correct that McCabe goes beyond Aquinas in his use of logical and linguistic tools. McCabe's friend, Anthony Kenny, notes in the forward to McCabe's *On Aquinas,* based on a two term lecture series delivered at Blackfriars, Oxford, that while McCabe was allergic to being defined by any school, he was a keen student of both Thomas and Wittgenstein. McCabe's reading of Thomas is 'as he admits, in a sense more linguistic than the

[17] Étienne Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*, (C. Scribner's Sons: New York, 1938), pp. 83–84.

[18] Murphy, *God is Not a Story*, p. 21.

[19] Murphy, *God is Not a Story*, p. 105.

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historical Aquinas was'.[20] For McCabe, the analytic tools available to twentieth, and presumably twenty-first, century thinkers are superior to their thirteenth century counterparts, especially with regard to linguistic analysis. These tools allow for friendly amendments to Thomas. What figures following Frege and Wittgenstein have in common and what McCabe says of himself, is that they 'start from the language end instead of, as Aquinas does, starting from the thought end'.[21] McCabe goes on to clarify, 'we analyse understanding and thinking in terms of human communication whereas Aquinas analyses communication in terms of understanding and thinking'.[22] Underlying this point of disagreement is the fundamental point of agreement for Thomas, Wittgenstein, and McCabe that as rational animals human beings are also necessarily linguistic animals. McCabe views his friendly disagreement with Thomas as a way of proving Thomas more fundamentally right.

The move from thought to language is the slip to method for Murphy. Murphy finds the constraints of method everywhere she looks in McCabe's writing. Her main evidence of the ruin of method on McCabe is in his distinction between creator and creature, especially in his reading of the Five Ways and the real distinction—which are both evacuated of meaning by method. Though proofs for the existence of God and the real distinction are metaphysical in hands of Thomas, Murphy objects that the grammatical Thomists reduce these to questions of language and prioritize a narrative produced by linguistic methods. The Five Ways are reduced to a series of 'why' or 'how come?' questions.[23] Murphy writes that for the grammatical Thomists, 'the highest form taken by human questioning rationality is language and, […], since the "why proof" finds its vocation in providing an argument which prescinds from empirical events, it functions perfectly within a theory aimed at translating metaphysical concerns into concerns about the logic of religious language'.[24] Murphy holds on what she takes to be the contrary that the Five Ways are about empirical events which 'wend through causes, movement, potentialities, actualities, and guided growth'.[25] She writes 'Thomas was one of the literal-minded fellows with whom it is torture to watch television: in their naive realist delight in the facts before their eyes, such persons lose the drift of the most basic editorial cut, such as from day to night, intuit no implied sense in the gaps, and loudly require to be led across each scenic shift'.[26] What

[20] Herbert McCabe, *On Aquinas*, (Continuum: London, 2008), p. ix.
[21] McCabe, *On Aquinas*, p. 133.
[22] McCabe, *On Aquinas*, p. 133.
[23] Murphy, *God is Not a Story*, p. 96.
[24] Murphy, *God is Not a Story*, p. 89.
[25] Murphy, *God is Not a Story*, p. 96.
[26] Murphy, *God is Not a Story*, p. 95.

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empirical evidence Murphy might have of Thomas' television watching habits, I couldn't possibly say.

Murphy appeals to the authority of Gilson to soften McCabe's methodological distinctions: 'Étienne Gilson was more cautious [than McCabe]. For *every* philosopher who is also a Christian believes the world is created by God, and thus believes in a difference between created nature and divine nature: but few medieval Christian theologians thought much of the real distinction'.[27] The real distinction is a side feature of Christian thought that McCabe makes the main event. Again, Murphy quotes Gilson that just because created being do not provide sufficient reason for their own existence, 'does not necessarily imply that the thing in question is itself composed of its own essence and of its own existence; it merely expresses the relation of effect to cause which obtains between any creature and its Creator'.[28] Murphy takes the grammatical argument for the real distinction and why questions to require a certain type of 'intuition'. She writes that: 'The distinction between *esse* and essence takes on its impact when seen as running through human being. Because the why question is essentially experiential or phenomenological'.[29] Like the Five Ways, Murphy argues that one cannot immediately move to the vertical '"why does it exist" question but only to ''horizontal" arguments from movement and cause, all based, not in *esse* but in essential nature or quiddity'.[30] The grammatical Thomist metalinguistic reading of the Five Ways 'inadvertently turns full circle into a foundationalist "fideism of faith"'.[31] She reasons that *esse* is evacuated of meaning in this world and thus of any vital concerns human beings might have. Again, drawing on Gilson, Murphy returns to her vision of organic unity. 'The existence of God which both can lead non-believers to this insight and which enables believers to corroborate their faith with evidence'.[32] But nothing in McCabe's account precludes this corroboration in the development of insights, though he would suspect any final settlement.

McCabe's clear distinction between divine and human is meant to allow for richly drawn creaturely life that is intimately involved in divine life. In his reading of the Five Ways as why questions, he clearly distinguishes between the sort of answer the Five Ways are seeking after and answers within the created realm. McCabe insists God is not a part of the universe but is Creator of the universe. Therefore, McCabe concludes 'Every action in the world is an action of God'.[33] This is

[27] Murphy, *God is Not a Story*, p. 190.
[28] Murphy, *God is Not a Story*, p. 192.
[29] Murphy, *God is Not a Story*, p. 194.
[30] Murphy, *God is Not a Story*, p. 191.
[31] Murphy, *God is Not a Story*, p. 85.
[32] Murphy, *God is Not a Story*, pp. 108–109.
[33] McCabe, *God Matters*, p. 7.

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compatible with the action being the action of a creature. So too that anything that is is because God is, but this does not subsume individual substances into God. It is from these distinctions that McCabe's first target against claiming to speculate about the sort of being God arises. God is a sort of being who is wholly unlike created beings. Murphy's suspicion seems to be that the clarity of these distinctions is a product of method rather than reality. To use her television metaphor, that this clear distinction is a jump cut in the service of some imposed narrative.

What is puzzling about Murphy's critiques is the narrow construal of language such that McCabe's pivot to language is away from reality. Certainly, for Wittgenstein, who motivates at least part of McCabe's move to language, speaking about grammar does not preclude speaking about the essence of things. As Wittgenstein famously claims in his *Philosophical Investigations*, 'Essence is expressed in grammar'.[34] The distinction between speaking *in* a grammar and undertaking a grammatical investigation is central to the realism of Wittgenstein's approach. Grammar itself is a body of rules for making true and false statements.[35] The rules of grammar specify what falls under various concepts and how concepts can be combined to form sensible propositions. The rules of grammar are not themselves candidates for truth and falsity. The methods of grammar are meant to clarify the essence of things, not to dictate what sorts of things can be spoken about. 'Grammar tells what kind of object anything is (Theology as grammar)'.[36]

If philosophy does have a methodological privilege, it is only insofar as it brings to light what is already happening in language. Philosophy aims for 'an overview (*übersehen*) of the use of our words' so that they may become 'surveyable' (*Übersichtlichkeit*).[37] A survey is not a methodological constraint in Murphy's sense. Anthony Kenny has made the case on various occasions that Wittgenstein's approach to philosophy harkens back to a pre-Cartesian approach albeit with a sensitivity to developments in logic. Kenny notes: 'Wittgenstein […] like Aquinas stands at the opposite pole of philosophy from the Cartesian tradition which sees epistemology as the basic philosophical discipline and private consciousness as the fundamental datum of epistemology'.[38] Wittgenstein's grammar is an escape from the primacy of method not another manifestation of it. McCabe hints at this rather colourfully noting that the 'Dark Ages of the Renaissance',

[34] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, (Wiley-Blackwell: Chichester, October 2009), § 371.

[35] 'To grammar belongs everything antecedent to truth'. P. M. S. Hacker, *Insight and Illusion: Themes in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, (Anthem Press: London, 2021), p. 185.

[36] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 373.

[37] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 122.

[38] Anthony Kenny, 'Aquinas Medalist's Address', *Proceedings of the ACPA*, Vol. 80, 2007, p. 24.

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when scholastic logic was lost, only came to an end with Frege, and the new logical illumination continues with Wittgenstein.[39]

McCabe finds common cause between Wittgenstein's 'mystical' in the *Tractatus* and *esse* in Thomas.[40] The question of *esse* is not about how the world or anything in it exists but that it exists. In his article 'The Logic of Mysticism', McCabe writes, 'For St Thomas, then, the *esse* of things turns out to be their createdness, their gratuity; so that all talk of God has its foundation in the *esse* of creatures'. But McCabe's use of *esse* does not reduce God to a quirk of grammar. He continues: 'This is not a reductionist view of God (as though we were saying that all talk of God is "really" about features of the world)'.[41] Distinguishing *esse* is precisely to avoid reducing God to features of the world while still acknowledging God acting through all the features of the world. Far from reducing God to a story, this approach sees God active in every story and in all of creation. McCabe is not bound strictly to Wittgenstein or his methods. While the mystical is the end of speech for Wittgenstein, at least on McCabe's reading, 'St Thomas does not give up so easily'.[42] Knowing what God is not is the basis for speaking of God—though acknowledging that we are saying what God is not through analogy and elaborating through metaphor. Careful predication is not quietism.

God Language and Community

One deeply invested in community, like McCabe, is an odd candidate for individualistic Cartesianism. Far from being in the thrall of Cartesian method, McCabe argues that 'My thought can never be just mine as my sensations are mine (there could scarcely be a greater contrast with the world of René Descartes)'.[43] For Thomas and McCabe 'My thinking is *my* capacity to transcend my individuality; it is my thinking of meanings which are not just mine'.[44] This is also true of obedience to a superior—one enters into the public thought of the community. Following Thomas, McCabe draws the connection between immateriality and intelligence. Human intelligence may be rooted in the material and shared in a community. Divine intelligence is wholly immaterial. Human beings have no access to understand such intelligence

[39] Regarding 'taken formally'. McCabe, *On Aquinas*, p. 21.

[40] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, (Routledge: London, 2001), . sec. 6.44.

[41] Herbert McCabe, 'The Logic of Mysticism—I', *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, Vol. 31, March 1992, p. 53.

[42] McCabe, 'The Logic of Mysticism—I', p. 55.

[43] McCabe, 'The Logic of Mysticism—I', p. 56.

[44] McCabe, 'The Logic of Mysticism—I', p. 57.

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except by their own limited intelligence. McCabe writes 'Because intelligence belongs to the immaterial, if we deny materiality to God we must say he is intelligent. Because of a piece of negative knowledge, we can make this positive statement'.[45] Harkening back to what matters to McCabe, it matters that human beings try to speak about God in this way, but it also matters that they are self-conscious of the limits of speaking about God. It matters that when we try to speak about God, we are self-conscious about how we are doing so. McCabe writes: 'We are simply taking language from the family context in which we understand it and using it to point beyond what we understand into mystery that surrounds and sustains the world we do partially understand'.[46] But this self-consciousness is not a dead end but an impulse to move forward. Indeed, McCabe reads the Five Ways as an investigation into the language of God and by extension the sort of practices one undertakes to talk about God. McCabe observes that 'to assert that God exists is to claim the right and need to carry on an activity, to be engaged in research'.[47] This research includes language and a community of speakers.

Faith and reason find their organic unity in the activities of life seeking after God. Faith is sharing in God's knowledge which is still a kind of darkness because it is natural to God but not to human beings.[48] In a discussion of faith, McCabe returns to an educational image to explain faith. In the human realm one grows from needing to accept the authority of teachers to eventually and perhaps only in certain areas knowing for oneself. The student may refuse the authority of the teacher when she comes to develop critical thinking on her own but would be foolish to do so otherwise. So too divine life increases when one is on earth but never to the point of independent critical thought on divine life. '[W]e never dispense with faith until we actually see God face to face'.[49]

Faith is distinguished from knowledge in the necessity of trust required. 'Now faith is certainly a leap into the unknown in the sense that what you believe is something that cannot be known by ordinary human power. But it is a leap which precisely tries to make this known. It is not a rejection of knowledge, it is an effort to know more - to get to know more by trusting in a teacher'.[50] This trust in the divine teacher like trust in the human teacher develops the student and manifests itself concretely. 'The divine life, therefore, because it transcends human life, will involve some reorganization of human life

[45] McCabe, 'The Logic of Mysticism—I', p. 57.
[46] McCabe, 'The Logic of Mysticism—I', p. 58.
[47] McCabe, *God Matters*, p. 2.
[48] Herbert McCabe, *Faith Within Reason*, (Bloomsbury: London, 2007), p. 21; McCabe, 'The Logic of Mysticism—I', p. 58.
[49] McCabe, *Faith Within Reason*, p. 24.
[50] McCabe, *Faith Within Reason*, p. 25.

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towards a larger world, the world of eternity'.[51] The precise determination cannot be set out ahead of time. The reorganization of the human through encounter with the divine is enabled by the non-competition of humanity and divinity, which is expressed in the real distinction. 'I would claim that our divinity (one manifestation of which is our faith) transcends our humanity, but is certainly not opposed to it. The Spirit of Christ by which we live is not destructive but creative. It does not reject anything human'.[52] Rather the Spirit allows for new ways of being, acting, exploring.

Though McCabe does use the image of movie projection to describe the Incarnation, the force of the image is that receptivity of the screen, the ability of the screen to distort the projection of the divine because of the 'rubbish dump' that is the world at times.[53] In Wittgensteinian tones, McCabe likens human life to a game more than a movie. 'We are born as players of this game; we do not *decide* what shall be its aim and purpose. We *discover* these things'.[54] The best way to learn the rules of the game is to play it with help from experienced players. McCabe notes that even the Decalogue is an outline of the rules and precisely how to follow those rules is not always clear as the Rabbinical commentaries on the Decalogue and the Torah more generally make evident. Jesus Christ is the only human being who plays the game perfectly. The saints play it well. Divine charity is the rule that regulates all the other rules.

The game of human life includes rules beyond the human that humans struggle to articulate. McCabe pithily summarizes: 'Aquinas thought that the point of human living cannot lie outside human living. I mean it cannot lie outside in the way that the point of a machine lies outside itself…I think it is true and very, very importantly true that the point of human living lies beyond itself, but not outside itself'.[55] God is profoundly present, and human beings retain their integrity as creatures. The distinction between 'beyond' and 'outside' underlies McCabe's caution with religious language. Human beings cannot properly speak of God who is beyond even while living with God, who is the point of their lives. By way of friendly amendment to Thomas, McCabe turns to Wittgenstein's grammar to clarify the point of human lives beyond but not outside human living for the twentieth and twenty first centuries.

McCabe takes theological speech to be principally concerned with avoiding saying things that stifle formation so that we can keep playing and learning the game. Being formed in and practicing theology

[51] McCabe, *Faith Within Reason*, p. 26.
[52] McCabe, *Faith Within Reason*, p. 26.
[53] McCabe, *God Matters*, p. 48.
[54] McCabe, *On Aquinas*, p. 55.
[55] McCabe, *On Aquinas*, p. 33.

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is not only concerned with speaking about God but also with showing the proper restraint, knowing when one is standing on insecure ground: 'Theology is a difficult and very rewarding occupation but for the most part it is not concerned with trying to say what God is but in trying to stop us talking nonsense, trying to stop people making God in their own images, to stop us from mistaking our concepts and images and words for the mystery towards which they point'.[56] The theological task is primarily negative, to avoid saying silly, perhaps even idolatrous, things about God. The methods one uses to evaluate the expression of faith are ultimately at the service of living faith, of playing the game in community. McCabe writes: 'Faith can be, and has to be, expressed in propositions. But it isn't about these propositions; the propositions themselves have continually to be tested to make sure that they are expressions of faith and not of something else, expressions, that is, of belief in God's love for us'.[57] The listening exercise of obedience is one manifestation of this testing, philosophical and theological reflection on religious language is another. Improperly claiming to know the essence of God, to speculate on a topic on which one cannot speculate stultifies a process of coming to know and live what matters. McCabe's realism is founded in growing in God's love, this matters above all else.

Matthew Ian Dunch SJ
Campion Hall, Oxford University

matthew.dunch@campion.ox.ac.uk

[56] Herbert McCabe, *God Still Matters*, (Continuum: London, 2010), . p. 216.
[57] McCabe, *Faith Within Reason*, p. 36.

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