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McCabe on Aquinas and Wittgenstein

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Introduction

When I mentioned to a colleague in Dublin that I was contributing a paper to a conference on Herbert McCabe in Oxford, she replied that he was responsible for the birth of her second child. In response to my incredulous stare she explained that having had a long conversation with him in The Eagle and Child, discussing the difficulties of being an only child, she was thereafter predisposed to increasing her family. Herbert probably would have enjoyed that story and used it as a characteristically colourful example in an account of the kinds and vagaries of causation. (He did, after all, refer on occasion to his alleged sex life in explicating deliberation)[1]. The theme of this paper is his use of Aquinas and Wittgenstein – which to continue the familial analogy many would regard as a shotgun wedding, doomed to failure. Against that pessimistic outlook I want to argue that his bringing together of these two thinkers proved illuminating and helped bring to the fore neglected aspects of each one. In section one I wish to discuss some similarities and differences between Herbert McCabe and Wittgenstein which will serve to contextualise McCabe's work. In section two I want to briefly canvass some issues in philosophy of mind where he noted common cause between Aquinas and Wittgenstein. This is territory which is well known and which many now think of as a plausible connection to make – seen for example in the work of Fergus Kerr or Anthony Kenny[2]. In the third section I want to look at much more implausi-

[1] Abbreviations of McCabe's Works Cited.

A *On Aquinas*, London, Continuum, 2008
C "Categories" in *Aquinas*, A.Kenny (ed) Macmillan 1969
FWR *Faith Within Reason*, Continuum, 2007
GM *God Matters*, London Mowbrays, 1987
GSM *God Still Matters*, London, Continuum, 2002
LLL *Law Love and Language*, London, Sheed and Ward 1968

A p. 67.

[2] See F. Kerr *Theology After Wittgenstein*, 2nd edn, SPCK, 1997, A. Kenny, *Aquinas on Mind*, OUP 2002.

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ble connections in metaphysics and philosophical theology and claim that McCabe managed to bring these two thinkers into some kind of relationship other than the mutual antagonism one might antecedently expect.

1. Herbert, Ludwig and Thomas

In this section I shall refer to the three figures as Herbert, Thomas and Ludwig, to highlight features of their forms of life, which ground the language games in which they engage. Firstly I shall draw attention to a number of issues which constitute odd similarities between Herbert and Ludwig. I shall mention three here.

(i) Firstly there is the unusual phenomenon of posthumous publication. Neither were prolific publishers during their lives, but both nevertheless wrote extensively and had their *Nachlass* edited after their deaths. There are similar stories of missing manuscripts, or texts being retrieved from unusual repositories (from mattresses in Wicklow or leaky shoes in Oxford). This in itself is a merely accidental similarity, but it points to a deeper, more essential similarity.

(ii) This second feature is a lack of concern for academic propriety or convention. Wittgenstein, famously, in dress and deed avoided academic pomp. There's the anecdote that on being stopped on his way into the Joint Session because of his casual attire by an English philosopher who said "I'm afraid there's a gathering of philosophers going on in here", Wittgenstein retorted darkly "I too".[3] It seems that a certain kind of concern with the issues, rather than with self advancement or careerism characterised both of their approaches (in McCabe's case, both academic and ecclesiastical). In this light, McCabe's life of poverty and Wittgenstein's disbursement of his enormous personal wealth signal a common concern with deeper matters which impacted on their manner of life. Returning to the point about publication, neither published merely for the sake of it, or produced in Denys Turner's phrase "just more stuff about stuff"[4]. They saw no point to it. In both cases there is evidence of their sense of being outsiders, not part of the club. Wittgenstein was an Austrian, interned after WWI and although taking out British citizenship before WWII, remained an outsider for his life. Monk comments "To be a professor was bad enough, but to be an English professor became, in the

[3] Ray Monk, *Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*, 1991, p. 275.
[4] "Foreword" to FWR p.vii.

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end, unbearable"[5]. He speaks in the foreword to *Philosophical Remarks* as being out of step with the contemporary mindset[6]. He sought out places such as Killary Harbour – "one of the last pools of darkness in Europe"[7] as a place to work. In *Zettel* he remarks that "A philosopher is not at home in any community of ideas"[8] and he had a sense of his work not being understood, even by close colleagues such as Russell. Despite being born in Lancashire, McCabe came to identify more and more with his Irish heritage, finally taking out Irish citizenship and quoting 'The Proclamation of the Republic' and James Connolly in his first book (unusual in a book published in England *and* a book of moral theology).[9] His espousal of left wing politics is well known. His famous sermon on the genealogy of Christ in Matthew's Gospel points out the low-life aspects of the characters, saying that Jesus came from a line different to that of Mary Whitehouse and readers of the *Observer* or *The Irish Times*.[10] In life and thought they both exhibited a going against the grain, an individuality generated not as an aesthetic accessory in a certain kind of Oxbridge manner, but from inner sensibility and conviction.

(iii) Thirdly, both shared a religious sensibility. That might sound platitudinous in the case of Herbert and tendentious in the case of Ludwig (who shunned organized religion) – but as Wittgenstein famously remarked to Drury "I am not a religious man, but I can't help seing every problem from a religious point of view, I would like my work to be understood in this way".[11] In both cases there was an impatience with superficiality, facile conformism and a repugnance of sentimentality. Fergus Kerr has well catalogued various ways in which Wittgenstein retained strong elements of his Catholic heritage, while keeping true to the fact that he lost faith as a teenager.[12] But while he remained unable to intellectually subscribe to many elements of Catholic dogma (and marveled at being surrounded by so many Catholic converts among his students), he immersed himself in religious texts – Augustine, Kierkegaard, William James, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, the Vulgate, Tagore. There are amusing

[5] Monk op cit p. 488.

[6] *Philosophical Remarks*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975, "Foreword".

[7] See "Wittgenstein in Ireland", George Hetherington, *Irish University Review*, Vol. 17 no. 2 Autumn 1987, p. 176.

[8] *Zettel*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967, #455.

[9] LLL.

[10] GM p. 246ff.

[11] RW p. 79.

[12] *Work on Oneself*, Arlington: IPS Press, 2008 ch. 2.

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> accounts of the clash of mindset when he met the Vienna Circle in the late 1920's and insisted on reading Tagore to those whose primary interest was in the logical sytnax of language, the role of tautology in explicating logical consequence or the assimilation of elementary propositions to naturalized sensory inputs from Gestalt psychology. He also seems to have felt at home with certain kinds of ritual – recommending to his friend Drury to go to mass as a way of finding mental peace.[13]

Despite these similarities there are also signal differences, three of which I want to draw particular attention to insofar as they highlight ways in which Herbert is close to Thomas.

(i) Even though I noted a shared religious sensibility between Ludwig and Herbert (which, say, distinguishes them from Russell, Dawkins or most Anglophone philosophers), Herbert was a committed Roman Catholic, a Domincan Friar, the author of a Catechism and an educator of young religious, a novice master. He endorsed doctrines such as the Incarnation, the Trinity, the Resurrection, eternal life, which Wittgenstein rejected. Even though Wittgenstein contemplated becoming a priest whilst a prisoner of war and subsequently worked as a monastic gardener – he never as an adult found himself capable of being part of a religious community.

(ii) Wittgenstein, notoriously, placed little emphasis on the history of philosophy. He remarked close to the end of his life that he had never read a word of Aristotle – and there's little evidence that he read Aquinas. His manner of doing philosophy explicitly goes against 'the great tradition' and sets itself up as a corrective, a form of therapy for those ensnared by philosophical error. He counseled his students against becoming academic philosophers. On the contrary Herbert was immersed in Aristotle and Aquinas. Even though he also read moderns such as Russell, Strawson, Carnap, Quine and Ryle, his conceptual framework was that of Aquinas. Various commentators have noted that he didn't want to be known as a Thomist. As he explains it himself:

> Then the intensely conservative Roman Church of the nineteenth century, terrified by the Enlightenment, went back and dug up St Thomas because they thought he might provide the intellectual framework they needed to hold the crumbling fabric of Christianity together. They invented "Thomism", a specially conservative version of his thought insufficiently liberated from Cartesian questions and it turned out to be a weapon that twisted

[13] RW p. 165.

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> in their hands. For it led to a new critical historical study of Aquinas. The new study of the text of Thomas proved if anything more corrosive of the Catholic establishment than ever the Enlightenment had been. It was corrosive from inside.[14]

Herbert found Thomas an inspiring and invigorating intellectual master – one who would break down conservative institutions rather than bolster them. Hence his discomfort with the label Thomist– even if prefixed by Analytical, Wittgensteinian or even Doubting. Nevertheless the point is he was saturated in Thomas's thought, which marks a signal difference to Wittgenstein.

(iii) Finally, Herbert wrote significant pieces of philosophical theology. He discussed causation, creation and the problem of evil, categories, the logic of mysticism – all of which sought to elucidate the picture of reality presented by Thomas in a contemporary setting. Wittgenstein abhorred such projects. He was dismissive of Frederick Copleston on a radio debate with A. J. Ayer – he said that even though Ayer was incredibly shallow, Copleston contributed nothing at all to the discussion.[15] Fergus Kerr has speculated to what extent as a young man Wittgenstein had been exposed to just the kind of Thomist apologetics attacked by Herbert – his family had hired a priest to teach him catechism at home and he excelled in religious studes in Linz.[16] Perhaps his rejection of Viennese Catholicism coloured his whole perception of attempts to 'eff the ineffable', as Beckett memorably put it. Recalling his own distinction between showing and saying – the crass error of philosophical theology was to attempt to say what can only be shown.

I mention these elements of Herbert and Ludwig's life to signal the complexity of the relationship between their thought. I also believe that, in a Wittgensteinian manner, attention to the form of life provides a way of resolving the intellectual conundrum of bringing Aquinas and Wittgenstein together, which topic I shall return to at the end of this paper.

2. UnCartesian Meditations

It was a familiar trope in twentieth century philosophy that Cartesian dualism had to be overcome. Whether this is to be achieved through American pragmatism, Franco-German phenomenology or

[14] A p. 4.
[15] RW p. 159.
[16] WOO, ch. 2.

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Wittgensteinian therapy, there are few explicit dualists left (and those who are seem to be influenced by religious considerations – for example Swinburne or Taliaferro).[17] Nevertheless exposing one's interlocutors as covert dualists is a familiar enough tactic within certain strands of philosophy (another shameful exposure is to be revealed as a foundationalist). It even happens in theology, as fans of Rahner discovered to their cost.[18]

One result of this general tendency is that premodern accounts of mind suddenly become more attractive to post-Cartesian theorists and offer resources for thinking out a non-dualist view. For example, Putnam discusses Aristotle after Wittgenstein speculating whether Aristotle can help make sense of functionalism, McDowell makes use of the Aristotelian notion of second-nature, BonJour explicitly endorses Aquinas's account of intentionality (which leads his naturalistic opponents to label it sneeringly a NeoThomistic view, as if such naming alone refutes it).[19]

McCabe anticipated this approach in noting connections between Aquinas and Wittgenstein in their account of mind. He outlined a fairly commonly accepted view of the soul, that it is immaterial, can exist independently of the body, is special, subjective and spiritual and went on to say that such a picture is so wrong and so deeply held that it's probably better to abandon talk about the soul altogether.[20] Against that picture, defending an account where the mind is construed as the particular kind of way a certain kind of animal is constituted (its substantial form to use the jargon), Herbert emphasises the bodily, animal aspects of the human, which his anti-Albigensian forebears would no doubt have cheered on. Yet in so doing he doesn't collapse into behaviourism – despite his lively interest in Konrad Lorenz and studies of animal behaviour. As Wittgenstein argued, behaviourism is just the flip side of Cartesian dualism – accepting the conceptual framework where consciousness and bodily behaviour are severed, just backing the other pole. The interesting path, followed by both McCabe and Wittgenstein, is to try to show how both can interpenetrate.

McCabe does nevertheless point to one aspect of thought which transcends the bodily. The formation of mental images, *imaginatio*, is connected to bodily organs. But understanding itself, as Thomas argued, is not. Does that not point to a latent dualism? Well, the

[17] See R. Swinburne, *The Evolution of the Soul*, 2nd edn., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997; C. Taliaferro, *Consciousness and the Mind of God*, Cambridge: CUP, 2005.

[18] See F. Kerr *Theology After Wittgenstein, 2nd edn*. London: SPCK, 1997.

[19] See H. Putnam "Aristotle after Wittgenstein" in *Words and Life*, Cambridge Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1994; J. McDowell, *Mind and World*, Cambridge Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1996, L. BonJour, *A Defence of Pure Reason*, Cambridge; CUP, 1998.

[20] FWR p 123–124.

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problem of the separated soul is tricky and might require some kind of property dualism. But McCabe thought this was a matter of faith and didn't emerge from a philosophical analysis of the self. He notes:

> Aquinas speculates bravely on how a separated soul, at least in heaven, could somehow think as well as have the understanding which is the beatific vision . . . it is all rather an uphill struggle and it is with a sort of relief that Aquinas reminds us that in the Scriptures it is not immortality of soul we are promised but the resurrection of the body.[21]

What is the nonphysical dimension of the unseparated soul, the story about understanding which goes beyond the physical? McCabe contrasts what he regards as the correct story with the retrograde account given by David Hume, who brings together impressions (physical sensations) and ideas (mental content) in an inappropriate way. McCabe's preferred account is that form is transmitted from things in the world to the mind through the senses, but in the mind it exists in a non-material way. It is precisely its nonmateriality which allows for the universal features of thought.

The chief Wittgensteinian insight McCabe used and in which he transforms Aquinas, is to re-order the explanatory priority of language and thought. Aquinas held that language is explained by thought, moderns look at it the other way around.[22] Wittgenstein's famous private language argument didn't show that a language one might contingently hide from others is impossible, but that a language which was in principle solitary and disconnected from communal constraint isn't possible. It is not as if we have our solitary private thoughts in private language which are then translated into communal discourse – rather our mental life is constituted by the acquisition of language. As the child is habituated to the recurring familiar source of comfort and sustenance and learns to say "Mama", so does she acquire a concept. The nexus of visual, olfactory and tactile stimulation contextualised in a familiar round of activities constitutes the form of life where "Mama" acquires meaning. Language, thought and world interrelate – the child is not an alien explorer pre-equipped with her own language into which she translates the actions and sounds of adults in the 'external world'.

The realm of language cannot be reduced to a physicalistic analysis. Rules, norms and grammar are of a different kind to molecules or genes. For Thomas, the acquisition of an intelligible form comes at the end of a process where external and internal senses cooperate. The Wittgensteinian insight is that acquisition of a form can be thought of in a linguistic register. Just as language can't be reduced to its physical preconditions or vehicles, so grasp of a form is

[21] A p. 123.
[22] A p. 133.

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divested of materiality. When I think of a dog, I grasp the very same form that exists in the animal, minus its matter. That's why there isn't literally a dog in my mind. The concept is connected to sensory inputs, mental images and so forth, but is not reducible to them. The parallelism between linguistic concept acquisition and the physical processes leading to it on the one hand and the abstraction of an intelligible form from matter on the other provides a way of bringing together Aquinas and Wittgenstein.

Given that one can find commonality among pre and post Cartesians on mind, it seems quite a different matter to bring together philosophical theology with a therapeutic approach which seems to seek to eradicate anything like metaphysics.

3. Philosophical Theology

McCabe makes the rather unusual claim about Aquinas, that "he himself was not completely opposed to metaphysics".[23] At face value this seems akin to noting that Einstein wan't completely opposed to physics, or Hitler to world domination. So the context helps get at what McCabe meant. The contrast is with later scholastics and I think he was associating the term 'metaphysics' with a kind of rationalistic or deistic attempt to establish God as a first principle. The problem with this is that it removes the apophatic dimension, dispels the mystery surrounding God and so to speak domesticates the deity by incorporating God within a larger more encompassing conceptual scheme. Hence he says "St Thomas was a mystical thinker in that he was centrally concerned with the unknown and, in one sense, ineffable mystery of God".[24] Thus he sharply distinguishes Thomas's views from, for example, what he calls the metaphysics of contingency. Such metaphysicians give to God the job which McCabe believes should be given to nature – explaining the order of nature. Aquinas doesn't bring God in because natural explanations are inadequate. He brings God in because such explanations are *adequate*. God is not just another cause, in this case supplying being. God's act of creation is intellectually vertiginous – we can't really grasp it. To do a certain kind of metaphysics is to pretend that we can.

So what kind of metaphysics did Aquinas (and McCabe) endorse? Attention to language is at the core of it, which is what McCabe finds in Wittgenstein. A definition sets up the parameters of a certain kind of discussion – it establishes the rules of the language game. It doesn't give information within the language game, but rather

[23] FWR p. 61.
[24] GSM p. 13.

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allows for the possibility of the discussion, it sets up the preconditions of discourse. Therefore there is an important distinction to be observed between definitions and descriptions. Definitions set up the parameters within which descriptions may take place and make sense. McCabe explicitly connects the idea of setting up definitions with articulating the rules of a language game.

Linguistic philosophers following Wittgenstein used the distinction between facts about the word and rules of language to get rid of metaphysical beliefs. What seemed to be expressing deep facts about reality is actually an expression of the form of representation, the rules of language, or grammar and not a kind of 'super-physics'. On this account definitions express rules of language. They don't reveal anything about reality. Facts only make sense after the rules of representation have been set up.

McCabe argued persuasively that this dualistic distinction of matters of fact and linguistic rules was just too crude.[25] Factual sentences are those which allow contrary predicates of a subject. (In passing he dismisses the verificationist account of factuality – noting that sentences which cannot be verified can still make perfect sense, for example the classic "The present King of France is wise"). However, other sentences are such that the meaning of the subject term fixes certain predicates and disallows contrary predicates. This occurs in a number of ways – and this is what complicates the so-called rule of language side of things. 'Grass is green' is factual, in that it is possible for grass to be non-green (brown or yellow or painted white). However, "God exists" is not factual, since the meaning of God precludes "God does not exist" (and of course an implication of this is that we do not really understand the statement). McCabe endorses the Aristotelian account of the predicables, where factual sentences are contrasted with four other kinds of sentence – involving definition, genus, difference and proprium. These note different ways in which subjects and predicate may relate to each other. And on this account the relation of subject to predicate in a sentence is, for a large number of cases, fixed by the world. McCabe rejects a dualistic picture of a world of facts over against a world of sentences with speakers attempting to match one against the other, "the world permeates all of one's definitions of some parts of language, some definitions are worldly definitions".[26] Thus rules of language in some cases are partially fixed by the way the world is.

In articulating this view, McCabe is committed to the existence of natural kinds. He thinks that anyone who does not accept this would be very different intellectually to us. That is, someone who

[25] C p. 69.
[26] C p. 72.

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thinks that there is no significant difference between George ceasing to be a postman and George ceasing to be human, would be hard to engage with. George being human is an instance of an *ens per se*, while being a postman is a kind of logical construction, an *ens per accidens*. Of course many of the things which interest us do not belong to natural kinds –

> we have names for shoes and ships and sealing wax and cabbages and kings because these are the things we want or need to think about . . . .Aquinas would recognize only one of the list as a natural unit and that is the cabbage (and it would have to be a living cabbage in the garden, not a dead deracinated corpse in the kitchen).[27]

So while convention and human interest shape the grammar of all the rest, *cabbages* help shape the grammar of cabbages by virtue of the kind of things they are.

McCabe notes that Wittgenstein's famous discussion of games at PI 66 has striking similarities with Aquinas talking about being. There is no essence of being, nothing common to all things which exist which one can point to as the defining feature. Rather there are similarities and differences. This is what the expression 'Being is not a genus' means. Most commentators read #66 as an anti-essentialist point. McCabe connects it to an important part of Aquinas's account of being. He says "A great deal of [Aquinas's] metaphysical writing is concerned with an analysis of the behaviour of words of this kind which he calls transcendental words because they transcend the categories and belong to all of them".[28] Aquinas recognizes, indeed revels in differences. "There is no one kind of reality that we 'ought' to talk about but many which are real in different senses".[29]

So is this approach the mere taking of a linguistic veneer from Wittgenstein to present essences in a new light? Not quite – there are affinities in Wittgenstein's own thought with what McCabe is doing. McCabe addresses the fact that radically conventionalist philosophers resist natural-kind talk – we can call them ontological relativists, for example Putnam, Goodman or Rorty. They deny 'metaphysical realism' and argue that we have a conceptual freedom to describe the world as we like it.[30] McCabe disagrees. To think thus is to understand our engagement with the world as a kind of spectator who can put any kind of grid we like between us and the world. "In fact we are not just spectators, we are involved with and have to cope with things. And recognizing natural units is part of coping".[31] This

[27] A p. 18.
[28] C p. 90.
[29] C p. 91.
[30] For a discussion see my *Relativism*, Chesham: Acumen, 2002, ch. 4.
[31] A p. 11.

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notion of coping fits well with Wittgenstein. Form of life is a basic term of art for him and his examples of forms of life are often very basic activities such as passing slabs, counting apples, arranging piles of wood – simple tasks which generate conceptual schemes involving sortal terms, quantitative terms, colour terms etc. Our interacting with the world is the bedrock where explanations cease. A favourite phrase of Wittgenstein is our "natural history". The kind of creature we are and our way of interacting with the environment marks the kind of conceptualization of the world we have. Another way of expressing this insight is to say that the way things are known is relative to the mode of being of the knower, which should sound familiar.[32]

One of the traditional objections to essentialism is that it reifies the world, sets up ghostly intellectual structures which are non-responsive to actual inquiry. Against this McCabe notes that definitions *can* change – "we do modify our definitions and we do regard some language games as better than others".[33] Indeed this can be coupled with the surprising fallibilism which can be uncovered in Aquinas.[34] Even though scientific knowledge or *scientia* is necessary knowledge of causes, it can be hard to determine whether we actually have this or not – indeed we might think we have it and it turns out we were mistaken. So endorsing an account of essence doesn't commit one to unrevisable conceptual schemes, is closely connected to actual linguistic use, is compatible with the relativity of cognition to the kind of cognizer and best serves an account of the mind-world relation where coping serves as the master metaphor, rather than spectating. This is not far from Wittgenstein's late image of inquiry being akin to a river, with deeper structures changing much more slowly relative to the flow of the current. The flow of the river (descriptions) makes sense relative to the background context of river-bank, topography etc (definitions). But even these may change over time.[35]

In a number of different places, McCabe drew a connection between Aquinas and Wittgenstein on what he called the *Ut In Pluribus* doctrine.[36] Things with essences operate thus and so – for the most part. There is the possibility of defective instances of a kind – which the critical mass of a kind accommodates. Wittgenstein uses the example of money to make the same point. The existence of counterfeit money is only possible against the stable background of legal tender. It is possible for counterfeit money to exist, but not for most money

[32] "Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur", "Whatever is known is known according to the mode of the knower" – for example in ST I q.75 a.5 ad3.

[33] C p. 67.

[34] See Eleanore Stump, *Aquinas*, London: Routledge, 2003, chX; Anna Williams, "Is Aquinas a Foundationalist?" in *New Blackfriars* Vol.91 n.1031, Jan 2010.

[35] *On Certainty*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1969, #97.

[36] See for example FWR p. 52.

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to be so. Likewise it is possible for defective individuals of kinds to exist, but not for most cases. McCabe thinks that the conceptual space generated by such a doctrine is important and makes sense of the idea of freedom. I think Wittgenstein used the same point as part of his rejection of skepticism – it makes sense to doubt some things, but only against a backdrop of most things being held firm. Doubting everything at once, like all money being counterfeit or all instances of a kind being defective is not conceptually possible. McCabe says "This is the distinction to be drawn, for an Aristotelian, between the essence of a thing and its properties".[37] To lack some properties is to be a deficient example of X, but to lack an essence is not to be X at all.

Given that McCabe makes a case for essence, what then about existence, the 'quiet metaphysical ticking over' dismissed by J. L. Austin?[38] Returning to the fact/rule of language dichotomy, McCabe argues that one needs to have some expression "which expresses something about things which is neither a fact about them nor a rule for the linguistic use of their names".[39] Definitions (the realm of rules of language) set up what can be meaningfully said. Descriptions present facts which presuppose those definitions. Yet that something exists is not itself a definition or a description. The traditional way of explaining this is to draw attention to two operations of the intellect. The first deals with definitions and descriptions – it results in the establishment of meaningful sentences. The second is the assertion made with such sentences – the second act of the intellect, called *iudicium* or judgement. McCabe links this to the notion of statement. To assert something as true or false is to take a sentence and make a statement with it. The making of a statement is what expresses existence, but this must be sharply distinguished from any element in the meaning of the sentence. To make a statement is to affirm existence, to consider a sentence is to remain at the level of essence.

One implication of this linguistic approach is to solve the problem of non-existent essences. The potential essence, awaiting existence, is a sentence, a unit of meaning. When asserted it is capable of being judged true or false, depending on how the world is. The meaning of the sentence is context sensitive and the assertion is what brings in genuine assertion. (It is of interest to notice that in recent debates about relativism about truth, a similar distinction is invoked, with terms such as Lekton for sentence and Austinian Proposition for statement, to explain context sensitivity

[37] FWR p. 53.
[38] J.L.Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968, p. 68n.
[39] C p. 75.

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without relativising truth).[40] McCabe argues that this is a good way to think about existence. It shows that existence is distinct from essence and cannot be thought about in the same way. Indeed he invokes Wittgenstein's saying \ showing distinction – existence cannot be said, it can only be shown. It does not belong in the meaning of a sentence, but only is shown in making a statement. Existence is not esoteric or exotic, and it is basic to our talk about reality.

It is also basic to God and talk about God. McCabe calls the contrast between things existing over against the possibility that there might have been nothing at all the gratuitousness of things, and says this is what St Thomas calls their *esse*.

> When Wittgenstein in the Tractatus says "Not how the world is, is the mystical, but that it is": (6.44) it seems to me that he is engaged with the same question as St Thomas when he speaks of *esse*[41] . . . .the community of all things in *esse*, therefore, is their community as creatures of God, and it is this that is *das Mystische*.[42]

McCabe notes that Aquinas thinks that even though we do not know God's essence, we can use language to refer to God. This can be as cause, as the mysterious source of reality, as what God is not, carving out the grammar of what is acceptable and as stretching our ordinary terms beyond their regular usage to see God as having perfections. For example, God's goodness is not the same as ours, yet not equivocally something completely different. He also notes that most talk about God is metaphorical – many of these are incompatible with each other and many are grotesque or base – this protects one from mistaking the image for the reality.

4. Forms of Life

I claimed earlier that McCabe's bringing together of Aquinas and Wittgenstein brought out neglected aspects of each one. With Aquinas, he highlighted Thomas's attunement to language, and explored the essence/existence distinction as a distinction between sentences and statements. He also highlighted Thomas's pluralism – that being is multiple and can't be reduced to a simple formula. McCabe showed how a commitment to essentialism doen't have to be proscrustean, but can be responsive to inquiry, can be revisable and that many of the things which interest us don't have essences, but are socially constituted. In relating Wittgenstein to Aquinas he brought

[40] See Francois Recanati, *Perspectival Thought: A Plea for Moderate Relativism*, Oxford: OUP, 2007.

[41] GSM p. 21.

[42] GSM p. 2.

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out the idea that for Wittgenstein, coping was fundamental, that our conceptual choices are limited by the kind of beings we are and the kind of environment we inhabit. He also accepted and explicated Wittgenstein's ongoing commitment to *das Mystische*.

Given that such a connection might antecedently seem unlikely or impossible, what might be learned from it? One initial reflection is that it fits well with Aquinas's own practice – his contemporaries (e.g. Kilwardby, Pecham and Tempier) thought that his bringing Aristotle and Christian tradition into contact was doomed. However, positions which seemed incompatible were shown to connect fruitfully by him. A fundamental tenet of Aquinas was that truths do not contradict each other. He rejected two truth doctrines, or sharp separations of the worldly and the spiritual. Following Aquinas's own example, McCabe believed that Aquinas's insights could shed light on contemporary problems and that contemporary theorists could shed light on Aquinas's views. How could such differences be brought together? In this case it seems they united in McCabe's understanding of the world which involved his rootedness in a tradition but with an openness to contemporary developments. He was fundamentally committed to Aquinas's way of construing reality, but nevertheless believed that true beliefs of others could enrich that way. It wasn't a question of a syncretism or a simple amalgam, but a bringing together of what is valuable in each, as he judged it. Aquinas's views on astrology or biology or slavery can well be jettisoned, as historically conditioned and inessential. But his core beliefs about creator and creation can be brought to connect with Wittgenstein's views on self, language and world. McCabe's pursuit of authenticity and truth seems to me to serve as a model for various other pressing apparent conflicts. For example, there is the debate to what extent Buddhism and Christianity can relate to each other. They oppose each other as metaphysical theism and therapeutic anti-realism do. Yet McCabe managed to show how such contrasting views can speak to and illuminate each other. It seems to me that his example encourages the exploration of the truth in each. And in this he is congruent with Wittgenstein, who thought against the grain, found his thoughts out of step with his contemporaries and precisely because of this is the one we still think worth reading and rereading.

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