Metaphysical (Im)mortality and Philosophical Transcendence

JOHN HALDANE

I. Introduction

There is a lapidary saying owing to Etienne Gilson, that is often misquoted or adapted – with 'metaphysics' taking the place of 'philosophy' – and which is invariably reproduced in isolation. It is that 'Philosophy always buries its undertakers'. Understanding this remark as Gilson intended it is relevant to the issues of the nature of philosophy, and of what conception of it may be most appropriate or fruitful for us to pursue. The question of the mortality or otherwise of philosophy in general, and of metaphysics in particular, is a significant one for ongoing intellectual enquiry, and it is also relevant to the current position of academic philosophy in Great Britain and in the English-speaking world.

Although I am unable for reasons of space to make the case that would be required to establish the claim, my belief is that in the last thirty years philosophy has lost ground in the academy and in intellectual and educated circles more generally. In the decades following the second world war philosophers held the headships of a string of colleges and universities: Mary Warnock and Bernard Williams at Cambridge; Justin Gosling, Stuart Hampshire, Anthony Kenny, Anthony Quinton, and Geoffrey Warnock in Oxford; Malcolm Knox at St Andrews, A.D. Lindsay at Keele, and others elsewhere. Something of this continued with Onora O'Neill at Cambridge, Alan Ryan at Oxford, and Stewart Sutherland at Kings London then at Edinburgh, but by then the trend was away from the previous disposition in which philosophy was looked to as somehow comprehending the diversity of approaches represented by the different arts, humanities and sciences.

Of course, the ongoing and accelerating ramification of knowledge has led to levels of specialisation that make it impossible to comprehend the whole of even a major part. Yet still the hunger for understanding of human nature and of the universe is pressed, but whereas intelligent questioners might for generations have directed themselves to philosophers for general guidance they now are more

doi:10.1017/S135824610999004X © The Royal Institute of Philosophy and the contributors 2009

https://doi.org/10.1017/S135824610999004X Published online by Cambridge University Press

likely to look and listen to popularising scientists, historians and biographers. Again I recognise that advances in biology and in physics have elevated the standing and increased the claims to fundamental relevance of these sciences; but in understanding the trend away from philosophy as a general guide one also has to look to the practice of professional academic philosophers themselves and to how they conceive their activities – and their responsibilities. Certainly 'applied' philosophy has got going, but in the areas and approaches that enjoy intellectual prestige among philosophers themselves the favoured styles of enquiry and theorising have served to isolate philosophy from general literate culture. There is also the fact, with which I shall be concerned shortly, that philosophy in general, and metaphysics in particular once seemed to promise possibilities that contemporary professional practitioners have generally either disavowed or quietly moved away from, or of which they are altogether ignorant.

These are, I realise, fairly sweeping statements, and as previously noted, I am not here in the business of trying to construct a detailed argument about the movement of philosophy to the margins of intellectual culture, or its descent down the table of academic disciplines, but I would encourage readers to consider these general observations and to think how, if the situation is as I have suggested, it might now be rectified. In this connection it is worth remembering that philosophy is a discipline that depends for the most part on patronage and patrons have a right to ask about the general interest of the activities they support.

II. Gilson's insight

Returning then to the issue of the mortality or otherwise of philosophy, it is especially worth looking at the context within which Gilson's resonant words about it always burying its undertakers were first inscribed, for it reveals how his observation is connected with a broader understanding of the nature of philosophical enquiry and in particular metaphysical speculation – an understanding that also has implications for the study of the history of these disciplines.

The source is a book published in 1938 when the threat to western intellectual traditions was keenly felt. The text derived from a series of four lectures given by Gilson in Harvard in 1936–7, immediately following the publication in English of *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, the subject of his earlier Gifford Lectures at Aberdeen.

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Having raised the study of medieval and modern thought to new standards of scholarship and insight, he was interested in the possibility of drawing broader conclusions about the phases and movements within philosophy. The result is in four parts: 'The Medieval Experiment', 'The Cartesian Experiment', 'The Modern Experiment', and finally that from which the book takes its title: 'The Unity of Philosophical Experience'.[1]

Having observed oscillations between speculation and scepticism in the periods surveyed in the earlier parts, Gilson claims that these cannot be wholly explained in terms of biography, literary history, or even history of 'ideas' (understood as historical systems of thought). His suggestion is that we must instead see philosophers and their doctrines as 'ruled from above by an impersonal necessity' (307); for, as he then says, 'Philosophy consists in the concepts of philosophers, taken in the naked, impersonal necessity of both their contents and their relations' (308) . . . [and hence] . . . "the ultimate explanation of the history of philosophy has to be philosophy itself" '(308). Recurrence and oscillation, therefore, are not to be explained entirely by reference to historical, economic or sociological factors but by the inevitable dialectic of ideas.

The points are deep and important ones for the conduct of historically-oriented academic inquiry in philosophy, and in other fields such as art and science where concepts and conceptions play an important role in structuring and animating first-order practice. Those who look for causes and effects of ideas in the surrounding personal, social, cultural, economic and material environments risk the danger of losing sight of the conceptual and rational ordering of thought and thought-laden products. Historians of ideas may be sensitive to this, but their interests, like those of biographers, do not, as such, require them to assess the intrinsic merits of their chosen subjects. It is enough that an idea has a significant history, was entertained here and there, explains this and that; just as it is enough that a figure lived in a time and place, was influenced by and influenced others, acted in various ways, had certain relationships, and so on. By contrast, in considering the descriptive, normative explanatory, and expressive content of philosophical, as of artistic or of scientific, endeavours it is always necessary to relate them to other thoughts and works in point of response and comparison by reference to common purposes, and to evaluate them accordingly. Typically advances in these areas take the form of solving, or improving

[1] Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1938).

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treatments of inherited problems. But those solutions themselves give rise to new difficulties or questions, all against a background of enduring common concerns. Art, science and philosophy, at least in their fundamental expressions are essentially dialectical, and that is more than a matter of historical ordering and consequence. While this is not the occasion to explore the issue, these points are relevant to the issue of the nature and extent of progress in philosophy.[2]

From the identification of the dialectic of ideas, Gilson proceeds to derive a number of 'laws' or conclusions, the first of which introduces the oft-quoted phrase. He writes:

> Now the most striking of the recurrences which we have been observing together is the revival of philosophical speculation by which every sceptical crisis was regularly attended ... The so-called death of philosophy being regularly attended by its revival, some new dogmatism should now be at hand. In short, the first law to be inferred from philosophical experience is: *Philosophy always buries its undertakers*. (311–2).

Significantly, Gilson's remaining conclusions make explicit reference to metaphysics in terms that invite comment:

> '*by his very nature man is a metaphysical animal*' (314).
>
> '*metaphysics is the knowledge gathered by a naturally transcendent reason in its search for the first principles, or first causes, of what is given in sensible experience*' (315).
>
> '*as metaphysics aims at transcending all particular knowledge, no particular science is competent either to solve metaphysical problems, or to judge their metaphysical solutions*' (316).
>
> '*the failures of the metaphysicians flow from their unguarded use of a principle of unity present in the human mind*' (318).
>
> '*since being is the first principle of all human knowledge, it is a fortiori the first principle of metaphysics*' (319); and finally
>
> '*all the failures of metaphysics should be traced to the fact, that the first principle of human knowledge has either been overlooked or misused by the metaphysicians*' (323).

[2] See John Haldane, 'Has Philosophy made a difference and could it be expected to?' in Anthony O'Hear (ed.) *Philosophy at the New Millennium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); also published as *Philosophy* Supplement **48**.

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III. Metaphysics causality and existence

Gilson regards metaphysics, classically, as the study of being – *ente per se* (ονηον) – and he thinks that it belongs to the nature of mankind to reflect upon particular beings and to proceed from that to asking about the causes of them, proximate, distal and ultimate. Since *cause* is an analogical notion, however, such enquiries involve more than tracing lines of efficient, or 'movement', causation.

Certainly one may ask what previous *event* was responsible for some *occurrence*, and then ask about the *events* prior to that. But one may also ask about what makes some *particular* to be the *species* of thing it is, and from there ask what makes such a *species* to be what it is and so on. Again one may ask what a thing is *made of* and then ask about the nature of the composing *material*, and then about that of which its stuff is composed; or one may ask what a thing is *doing*, or what it is *for*, and then ask in turn about the point of the identified *aims* or *functions*. One may also enquire as to why some things do not exist that might have been expected, and in pursuing this question come to realise that while the causes of non-existence may in some cases be impediments in others they may be absences, privatory causes.[3]

In one or more of these ways (by pursuing efficient, formal, material, final and privative causes) one is brought, so Gilson would say, to the question of being as such – and from that to the issue of the cause of being. Traditional defenders of the arguments presented by Aquinas at the outset of the *Summa Theologiae* (*Prima pars*, q2. a3) often make a point of trying to explain how these are not directed at establishing the existence of a *first cause within* a series, but rather a cause of there being various kinds of causal series: *a first cause outwith*.

They are not always successful in this effort, in part because Aquinas himself gives examples of causal series and says that there must be a first member, or else subsequent members could not ensue – as when he writes 'anything in process of change is being changed by something else. Moreover, this something else, if in process of change, is being itself changed by yet another thing, and this last by another … Hence one is bound to arrive at some first

[3] On the matter of privatory causes, and on the analogicality of the idea of 'cause' and the suggestion that this has more than four analogates (efficient, formal, material and final) see, respectively, John Haldane, 'Privatory Causality', *Analysis*, Vol. 67, July 2007, and 'Gravitas, Social Efficacy and Moral Causes', *Analysis*, Vol. 68, January 2008.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S135824610999004X Published online by Cambridge University Press

cause of change not itself being changed by anything, and this is what everybody understands by God'.[4]

A more important obstacle to these expositors' efforts, however, is the persistence of a style of thinking about dependence that is so strongly cast that people find it almost impossible not to suppose that if it is said that 'not b unless a', then the relation in question must be either logical, or causal in the efficient sense. It is just such a cast of mind that makes one miss, or dismiss, the conclusion of the passage I just quoted, which, even though it is expressed in connection with a causal series, is not that there must exist a first cause in the series of changes, but that there must exist a cause of change per se, and hence of the series of changes – be it finite or infinite.

In some ways the distinctive and pre-modern character of Aquinas's style of argument is better expressed, and its difference better registered, in the reasoning from beings to being that St Thomas presents in his *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*. This turns on the famous distinction between being and essence. Consider the claim that something, *A*, does not exist 'through itself'. Most naturally this will be understood as saying that *A*'s existence is an effect of the activity, and hence the existence, of another. A is contingent upon, in the sense that it is causally dependent on, something else. Need a sequence of such dependent beings itself be dependent, in the sense of caused? Not obviously. Maybe the sequence just exists.

Still, there is another way of approaching the matter which suggests that the sequence, and its members, must after all be dependent – not in the way of necessarily having to have an antecedent originator – but because their existing does not follow from their nature. The difference between things that have one kind of causal ancestry and those that have another is an extrinsic difference. The difference between things that need causes and those that do not, because they exist through themselves, is an intrinsic one. The former are contingent the latter non-dependent.

Abstractly specified, non-actual possibilities of different sorts, the possibility of a cat and the possibility of a dog, say, differ in content but are alike in being non-actual. By contrast, the difference between an abstractly specified non-actual possibility and an actuality of the same sort, the distinction between the possibility of a cat, and an actual one, is not a difference of content (essence) but of existence (being). The possibility and the actuality are alike in species but are

[4] *Summa Theologiae*, Vol 2. Existence and the Nature of God, trans. Timothy McDermott (London: Eyre and Spottiswode, 1964), 15.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S135824610999004X Published online by Cambridge University Press

unalike in that the latter exists. One may formulate this reasoning either with regard to the extensions of concepts or with regard to concepts themselves. The issue can be put by saying that from the concept of f-ness, it does not follow that there are any fs (that the concept has an extension), or that there exists a universal nature *F-ness* existing antecedently to, and independently the concept of fness.

So there is a metaphysical difference expressible in terms of 'existing through itself' which is not, as such, that of having or not having an antecedent cause (though it connects with this), but is the difference between (a) having a nature of a sort that might be merely possible, and whose actualisation therefore depends for its being realised upon something else, and (b) having a nature of a sort that includes actuality. Things whose essence does not include existence, be it one, several or an infinite series of such, depend for their existence on other things from which their being is derived. Ultimately the existence of dependents flows from some being (or beings) whose essence includes existence and the causal power to communicate being, i.e. to *create* entities, and not just to change pre-existing ones.

Famously, Aquinas criticises an ontological proof, presumably that of Anselm, quoting the same passage from the psalms 'The fool said in his heart, There is no God' but in this case citing it to confirm that 'the opposite of the proposition "God exists" can be thought'.[5] (the thinker may have been a fool, and in error, but his atheism was not conceptually incoherent). He continues:

> I maintain that the proposition 'God exists' is self-evident in itself (*per se nota*), for as we shall see, its subject and predicate are identical, since God is his own existence. But because what it is to be God is not evident to us, the proposition is not self-evident to us, but needs to be made evident. This is done by things which though less evident in themselves are nevertheless more evident to us, by means, namely of God's effects.

Put in terms of concepts, Aquinas's position is that the notion 'essence-that-includes-existence' (E-E) is not the concept of a specific, determinate essence E, such that the concept E-E guarantees the existence of E's actualisation; rather E-E is the concept of a property concerning which it remains to be established whether any essence exemplifies it.

The argument of the *Sentences Commentary* progresses as follows: first it distinguishes *essence* and *existence*; then it shows that things

[5] ST Ia, q. 1, 1, *sed contra*; op. cit. 5.

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whose nature does not include existence, things which do not exist *through themselves*, must derive their existence from antecedent actualities; and from this it proceeds to the conclusion that a fully sufficient source of being must not *derive* its being but possess it by nature, which is to say, in the *Summa* terminology, in the source 'subject and predicate must be identical'. Accordingly, the proof is not purely conceptual but proceeds from dependent existence to that which is and gives existence.

In this, the Gilsonian progress is evident. Beginning with observed beings, one moves up to thinking about being and its conditions, and from there rises higher to recognise the necessity of a transcendent cause of the being of beings, which is itself Being.

Here I have jumped to the uniqueness of the first principle, whereas a moment ago I spoke of some being (or beings) whose essence includes existence and the causal power to communicate being. An argument for singularity is given in the following question of the *Summa*, which concerns the simplicity of God. Anything whose essence includes existence cannot derive that existence from anything external or internal to it, for otherwise by nature it would be only potentially existent, and so could not be an originating cause of the existence of anything else. An originator, so conceived, is pure actuality, it has no metaphysical parts or potentialities, and hence there could be no ontological ground for plurality, no basis for numerical diversification.

It is of course possible to retrace the steps of the preceding argument, object at every point, and then skip sceptically forward again: are we really sure that we have experiences? If we do, do we know that their objects include extra-mental existents? If that is assured, do we know that these have causes? If we do, do we know that there is a real distinction between the nature of a thing and its actuality? If so, can we then properly infer that actualities are dependent? If we can, do we know that there must therefore be non-dependent actuality? If there is, must it belong intrinsically and essentially to the nature of what has or is it? If so, can we conclude that the sufficient cause of the being of beings is being itself? If we can be sure of each and every preceding part, how do we know that Being is not many?

There has long been a population of philosophers treading up and down these stairways: the ascenders often avowedly pursuing the metaphysics of ultimate being; the descenders sometimes wanting to rest metaphysics at a lower level, and sometimes wanting to raise it to the ground. While acknowledging that not every stairway is equally easy to ascend, I share the belief of Aquinas and of Gilson

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that there is a structure of being, that it really does rise to the highest imagined level, and that the ascent is humanly possible. Now, though, I want to move from that traditional debate to consider a different issue, namely in what sense, other than that already explored, might the practice of metaphysics lead to transcendence?

IV. Metaphysics empiricism and science

There is no question but that there was a significant revival of metaphysics in English-language philosophy during the last quarter of the twentieth century, and it continues today. Whereas philosophers directly influenced by Austin, Ryle and Wittgenstein tended to avoid or to tread minimally into ontology, those inspired by Kripke, Lewis and Plantinga have marched to and fro across the field and been busy surveying, laying foundations and building within it. Interestingly, however, the new-found interest in metaphysics has not often been accompanied by existential or transformative concerns, such as characterised the approach of earlier figures like Bradley and McTaggart, or Bergson and Gilson. No doubt many factors contribute to this difference, some of them extra-philosophical. Yet there are some important features of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy that are relevant to this. Here I wish to mention two.

The first has been commented upon by Rorty[6] and Putnam[7], and by some others (though by the latter more often in the style of prefatory injunctions not subsequently heeded). This is the widespread assumption, particularly among American analytical philosophers influenced by Quine, that metaphysics is essentially the abstract

[6] See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1992), *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesotta Press, 1982) and *Truth and Progress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). For a late statement of his views particularly in relation to the 'scientific' aspirations of analytical philosophy see 'How many grains make a heap?' *London Review of Books*, 20 January 2005. This is a review of Scott Soames two volume history of analytical philosophy *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

[7] See Hilary Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) and 'Is Analytic philosophy a good thing?' unpublished.

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end of empirical theorising.[8] On this account philosophy takes up issues raised by natural science and helps clarify them, or draws from them conclusions more general and more abstract than would interest most trained scientists. Examples abound in the areas of substance, property, event, causality, identity, laws and modality, and space and time.

One apparent merit of this approach to the subject is that it answers the question sometimes raised by non-philosophers, and posed with a particular edge within universities where the competition for resources and prestige is most intense: *what is the use of philosophy?* The idea that it is a well-ordered and empirically respectful discipline that takes up the really hard questions raised by physics or evolutionary biology, or promises to sharpen canons of evidence and methodology, provides a clear answer satisfactory to many, if not to the incurious practitioners.

This scientific self-conception brings other institutional and professional benefits: the development of research programmes, determinate projects with specifiable aims and outcomes, the creation of research teams, a structured division of labour with graded expertise and training opportunities; a sense of an agreed agenda of well-defined questions, addressed through a consistent and shared methodology of enquiry, leading to clear and conclusive answers. One might capture all of this is in a slogan that some philosophers might now be happy to have inscribed within their offices: *funded progressive research*.

Although I offer this motto in a spirit of irony (which I testify to and record now in case the suggestion is actually adopted), I do not suppose that the scientific conception is entirely inappropriate, and there are branches of the subject, for example, philosophy of science, philosophical psychology, logic and philosophy of language, and philosophy of mathematics, where it may be both relevant and fruitful. I do want to point out, however, (and again I am here echoing others) that this contrasts markedly with another model of academic reflection which is that associated with humane learning. Here the latest is not presumed, even weakly, to be the best; the goal is not new knowledge but deeper understanding of long-familiar features of human experience and practice; and the methods are not theoretical and scientific, but descriptive and reflective.

[8] Quine himself was happy to say that philosophy is not just continuous with science but is even part of it. For an engaging and accessible discussion of Quine's views on the nature of philosophy see his interview with Brian Magee 'The Ideas of Quine' in Magee (ed.) *Men of Ideas: Some Creators of Contemporary Philosophy* (London: BBC, 1978).

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Elsewhere, in a previous Royal Institute of Philosophy lecture (in a series on Philosophy at the New Millennium) I addressed the question of whether philosophy in the twentieth century had made any difference to the resolution of the issues it inherited from earlier periods[9] and used the phrase 'intimations of "undeniable progress"' to characterise the tone struck by some eminent contemporary philosophers, including Derek Parfit, and perhaps more surprisingly Thomas Nagel. An example worth repeating is that of Paul Churchland who writes as follows:

> The [folk psychology] of the Greeks is essentially the same FP we use today, and we are negligibly better at explaining human behaviour in its terms than was Sophocles. This is a very long period of stagnation and infertility for any theory to display, especially when faced with such an enormous backlog of anomalies and mysteries in its own explanatory domain.[10]

The point here is not to discuss the merits of Churchland's scientific neurophilosophy but to suggest the contrast between this view and that of the humanistic philosopher who would think that human behaviour needs to be interpreted as personal, and hence related to the meanings and values that structure the existential and phenomenological space we inhabit.

Continuing on, he or she is likely to suppose that the human world has not much changed through recorded history, and that descriptions and interpretations offered by acute observers from any time or place are as likely to be as valuable as those of here and now. Indeed, for a variety of reasons, including the increasing influence of scientific styles of thinking about humanity, it might be that sources from a more humanistic culture are of greater value in the effort to see ourselves as persons. And if those sources seem confused about aspects of our behaviour then maybe that is a more appropriate response, for perhaps we are conflicted beings presenting the same anomalies and mysteries today as in antiquity, though we may now be less aware of them through a falsely applied scientific consciousness.

So much for the influence of science turning philosophy toward *scientism*. The second idea I wish to mention is connected with aspects of the modern scientific world view as that developed in the

[9] See John Haldane, 'Has Philosophy made a difference and could it be expected to?' op. cit.

[10] P. Churchland, 'Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes' *Journal of Philosophy*, 1981, 73–5.

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wake of the renaissance, but philosophy itself did much to shape and sharpen it.

Scientific corpuscularism and related theories of matter, space and motion (re)introduced the idea that in itself the universe is quite unlike the everyday world of experience. Conjoined with the empiricist thesis that all knowledge begins with the senses, this has a paradoxical result, namely, that our only primary source of knowledge is systematically deceptive. Things look coloured, sound noisy, taste sweet or sour, feel warm or cold, apparently diminish as they recede, and so on; but in reality it is quite otherwise, and moreover there is no naturally intelligible connection between the way things are in themselves and the ways things seem to the senses.

One reaction to this radical difference between the word of visible appearance and the hypothesised reality follows a line suggested by Cardinal Bellarmine ('Master of Controversial Questions') writing on April 12, 1615 in reply to the Carmelite provincial Paolo Foscarini's regarding the Galileo affair:

> . . . it seems to me that Your Reverence and Galileo did prudently to content yourself with speaking hypothetically, and not absolutely, as I have always believed that Copernicus spoke. For to say that, assuming the earth moves and the sun stands still, all the appearances are saved better than with eccentrics and epicycles, is to speak well; there is no danger in this, and it is sufficient for mathematicians.[11]

In other words one may hold to the appearances and remain agnostic about the hypotheses. On the other hand one may embrace the latter and demote the former. How far they may be demoted is a further issue, but the scientific temper of modern times has increasingly been inclined to regard them as practically ineliminable, but ontologically superficial and even phenomenal. Put into the key of epistemology, modern philosophy remains attached to a Lockean corpus of melodies. We may, and indeed we can only begin with experience, but that is an interaction between surfaces, one of which happens, mysteriously, to be sensitive, and what we should seek to infer is the internal nature and structure of substance, the permanent substructure around which our senses seem to see wrapped all manner of decorations.

Of course it is in the nature of the 'interior' as here conceived of that it cannot be an object of experience, for that could only be of another

[11] For the full text of the letter (in English translation) see The Galilean Library: Manuscripts at http://www.galilean-library.org/bellarmine1.html

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exposed surface. And so the world as real knowledge seeks to reconstruct it an essentially theoretical affair. Furthermore it lacks the features apparent to experience in the ordinary sense of the term, according to which we can be said to see beliefs being formed, desires being expressed or suppressed, purposes being pursued, things being said and done; animals hunting and rearing their young; trees and plants growing; and so on.

In the philosophy of mind Cartesianism and Lockeanism gave rise to the problem of how one can have knowledge of other minds. Generalised throughout philosophy they give rise to the problem of how one can have knowledge of anything other than what can be hypothesised as an underlying cause of appearances – and even knowledge of self, seemingly immune to this general scepticism, in fact remains silent on the inner substance of mind.

V. Metaphysics and transcendence

Evidently there is a marked contrast and a large intellectual gulf between the Thomistic metaphysics of Gilson and the Lockean scientism that characterises much contemporary philosophy. In the case of the former the link between metaphysics and transcendence was clear: metaphysics is the movement from experience of beings, to intellectual recognition of Being. Superficially this may seem to share a common structure with the position of the Lockean scientific realist, since both hope to lead consciousness from the world of everyday experience to that of abstractly inferred reality.

But the resemblance is only passing. For the point of the Gilsonian position is that the objects of common experience are not at all unreal, and that what one comes to know through the ascent of metaphysics is not something abstract and theoretical but something real communicated to and expressed in the world of experience: beings show Being. The Lockean position by contrast denies that what is known to sense are real beings, properly speaking; and insists that what is real, supposedly, is not available other than as theoretically postulated. Equivalently, whereas the Gilsonian contrast is between being as object of experience and as object of metaphysical recognition; the Lockean one is between objects of sense and postulates of science.

The latter, in effect, simultaneoulsy establishes dualities of sense and intellect and of appearance and reality, and its further philosophical contribution is to direct serious attention and interest away from the first to the second in each pair. No surprise then that this school of study, made more intensely scientific for reasons mentioned

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earlier, has little interest in possibilities of personal transcendence or transformation, and little interest in philosophy as the practice of the love of wisdom.

For the Gilsonian, by contrast, the philosophy that always buries its undertakers is both metaphysically and existentially transcendent in its aspirations. The metaphysical aspect has already been discussed and the existential follows from it in two ways. First, the ascent from beings, to the being of beings, to Being itself, is an intellectual movement of the person revealing his or her capacity to reach beyond common starting points. That implies much which I will here just point at by observing that the reflexive knowledge achieved in metaphysics supports an ennobling understanding of human nature.

One aspect of this concerns the issue of philosophical materialism and the question of whether this may be refuted by reflection upon human mental activity. Consider in this connection an argument for the immateriality of thought that derives from Aristotle (following a line of reasoning developed by Plato) but which is most fully developed in the writing of Thomas Aquinas and other medieval and scholastic Aristotelians. In *Summa Theologiae* Prima Pars, question 75, articles 5 Aquinas writes as follows:

> Whatever is received into something is received according to the condition of the recipient. Now a thing is known in as far as its form is in the knower. But the intellect knows a thing in its nature absolutely: ... Therefore the intellectual soul itself is an absolute form, and not something composed of matter and form. For if the intellectual soul were composed of matter and form, the forms of things would be received into it as individuals, and so it would only know the individual: just as it happens with the sensitive powers which receive forms in a corporeal organ; since matter is the principle by which forms are individualized. It follows, therefore, that the intellectual soul, and every intellectual substance which has knowledge of forms absolutely, is exempt from composition of matter and form.[12]

The terms in which the argument is cast are drawn from Aristotelian metaphysics, and some explanation of these follows below, but the essence of the argument may be represented as follows:

1. Intellectual acts are essentially constituted by conceptualized universal natures.
2. No materially instantiated property is universal.

[12] *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q.75, a 5.

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3. Therefore, conceptualized universal natures are not materially instantiated.
4. What is essentially constituted by non-materials is itself non-material.
5. Therefore intellectual acts are non-material.
6. Acts follow from and express the nature of the agent whose acts they are.
7. Therefore intellectual agents are non-material.

Setting aside exegetical details arsing with the fact that the same or similar arguments appear in different parts of the Thomistic corpus in slightly different forms, I shall suggest a reading of the argument according to which it may well be sound.

As stated in the quoted passage the argument presupposes the Arsistotelian thesis that cognition involves a reception of the form of the thing known into the intellect where it is deployed as a concept informing an intellectual act.[13] That is a counterpart of an analogous claim made by Aristotle and adopted by Aquinas that in the case of sense-cognition the sensible form of the object is received into the sense. In the case of the latter, St Thomas holds that the process of reception, and the realization of the form in the sense (which come to the same thing) are material processes.

As regards universals or general natures Aquinas holds a mediate position between *universalia in rebus* and nominalistic conceptualism. For him natures are as such neither one nor many, but many in things and one in the mind (*De ente et essentia*, and *Commentary on the Metaphysics*, V, 1). To each member of a natural kind K belongs an individualized nature: the kness-of-a, the kness-of-b, and so on. These natures are numerically distinct, being individuated by the matter they inform; but they are formally or specifically alike, and this formal identity provides the basis for a general nature produced by the mind in abstraction from particulars.

[13] The analysis of cognition in terms of the reception and exercise of species becomes particularly intricate in the writings of later Thomists, often involving additions to and changes of terminology. The best account of the subject as it is treated by St Thomas himself is Bernard Lonergan, *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas* (ed.) David Burrell (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1968), and for Aquinas and later Thomism more generally see John Peifer *The Concept in Thomism* (New York, NY.: Record Press, 1952) reprinted as Volume 3 of *Modern Writings on Thomism*, selected and introduced by John Haldane (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004). Piefer's book is unduly neglected and rewards study.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S135824610999004X Published online by Cambridge University Press

In sense cognition individualised forms corresponding to those in the objects of sense are formed under the material conditions appropriate to the particular sense organ. In intellectual cognition, by contrast, the principle of cognition is not an individualized form but the universal. When I look at Orbit the dog, both Orbit and my eyes feature individualsed sensible forms of the colours of her coat. When I think that dogs are animals, by contrast, the content of my mental act is not a particular dog, or the members of the set of existing dogs; rather it is dogness per se. Dogness per se, however, is an abstract entity, an immaterial universal. So if intellection involves a cognitive faculty receiving forms in this way, then that faculty and its acts are themselves immaterial. Put another way, if purely conceptual thought involves universals and is thereby immaterial, then since acting follows upon being (*agere sequitur esse*) the faculty or power is itself immaterial.[14]

Aquinas's argument has been charged with committing a fallacy of equivocation confusing two senses of *receiving a form*, in this case a universal formed by abstraction. The original source of this criticism, I believe, is an article by Joseph Novak who writes as follows:

> The difficulty in Aquinas's argument does not lie [in the claim that] spiritual accidents must have spiritual substances in which they inhere ... one can readily grant [this]. Rather the problem lies in attributing the property of being immaterial [intentionally] and immaterial [ontologically] in the same sense. A representation seems to possess the property of being immaterial [intentionally] while the intellect itself seems to possess the property of being immaterial [ontologically]. Moreover, one cannot argue from the immaterial quality of the form as representation to its immaterial quality as inhering accident, since the former possesses only intentional, while the latter possesses ontological, immateriality.[15]

Writing in terms more readily intelligible to a non-scholastic readership Pasnau formulates the same point as follows:

> It seems to me that Aquinas has fallen victim to what I call the content fallacy: the fallacy of conflating facts about the content of our thoughts with facts about what shape or form those thoughts take in our mind. When Aquinas characterizes the

[14] Here one may recall the affinity argument for the immateriality of the soul presented by Socrates in Phaedo, 78–80.

[15] Joseph Novak, 'Aquinas and the Incorruptibility of the Soul', *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, Vol. 4, 1987, 413.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S135824610999004X Published online by Cambridge University Press

> soul as 'having one power through which it makes things actually immaterial by abstracting from the conditions of individual matter, a power which is called the agent intellect' (79.4 ad 4) it seems to me that he has fallen victim to an ambiguity in the phrase 'abstracting from the conditions of individual matter'. That phrase might mean that the agent intellect produces an entity that is immaterial rather than material ... or that the agent intellect changes the representational content ... making it so that the newly formed intelligible species no longer represents 'the conditions of individual matter'.[16]

The common complaint is that there is a distinction between *epistemological* or *representational* abstraction on the one hand, as when one moves from an idea or representation of Orbit to a concept or representation of dogness, and *metaphysical* or *ontological* abstraction on the other whereby a material particular yields an abstract universal. In the case of the latter there is an existential difference between a material and an immaterial entity, while in the case of the former the difference is in intentional content. And granting that the process of intellectual abstraction may effect the latter, producing universal ideas (*concepts*) from particular representations (*percepts*) it does not follow that in crossing this intentional divide one has also crossed the ontological one between the material and the immaterial.

In order to assess this argument it is necessary to distinguish between thoughts as *mental acts* and thoughts as *intentional contents*. If at the same time during a particular day in 1999, Paul and Pauleen both thought that the second millennium is coming to an end then we can say that they had the same thought (content) while yet having different thoughts (episodes). Different criteria of identity and individuation apply to acts and to contents, but for the materialist whatever thoughts (as mental acts or states) are about, numbers, say, they themselves are certainly material entities; whereas for an absolute idealist whatever thoughts may be about, stones, for example, they are, in themselves, immaterial.

For Aquinas, sensory acts have particular sensibles as their objects and are themselves sensible particulars. Both sensings and what they represent (sensible characteristics) exist under material conditions, individuated by the quantities of matter that they characterise. Through a process of intellectual abstraction, however, particulars

[16] Robert Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 315–6.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S135824610999004X Published online by Cambridge University Press

(states of the sense-faculties) having particular contents (being of this or that individualised sensible form) are employed to form general conceptions. The challenge of the critics is that Aquinas fallaciously moves from what might be termed 'content de-particularisation' to 'ontological dematerialisation', whereas there is nothing in the former that either requires or supports the latter, and so far as abstractness of content is concerned that is compatible with it being carried by a material representation. Just as for Bishop Berkeley thoughts of rocks were made of mind, so for the materialist Aquinas's thoughts of God may be made of brain.

Three points are relevant by way of response. First, while intellectual judgements may be accompanied by conscious imagery or by none, their intrinsic content is abstract. Second, while the conceptual contents of such acts may have actual or possible empirical extensions (as in the judgement that dogs are animals), equally they may be such as could not possibly have anything like empirical realization conditions since they concern *abstracta* or *entia immaterialia*: as in a universally quantified mathematical formula, or in the judgement that every number is a species unto itself. The third point undercuts the distinction deployed in the charge of equivocation. In the case of sensory-cognition Aquinas's account of this involves material causation and therefore encourages the thought that presentational content per se is compatible with materiality. A generalisation from that might take the form of distinguishing act and content and deploying this in the ways considered above. But there is another possibility compatible with the materiality of sensory cognition but which blocks the act/content distinction as formulated and thereby denies the critics use of it against Aquinas. Suppose that instead of distinguishing representations as vehicles of content from representational content as such, one identifies sensory acts with their sensuous contents, and intellectual acts with their conceptual contents, treating both as pure *Vorstellungen* or cognitive presentations. On that account the presentation of a material particular as content is identical with the occurrence of a material particular, a state of the sensory system of the subject. Similarly the presentation of an abstract universal, being immaterial in content is thereby immaterial in substance. This provides an interpretation of Aquinas's argument in which it does it not rest on a fallacy, a suggestion that, as Pasnau remarks of his own analysis, involves a 'not very charitable explanation'[17] of his confusing intentional and ontological abstraction. It also suggests an understanding of intellection as the highest

[17] Pasnau, 351.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S135824610999004X Published online by Cambridge University Press

realisation of the power of cognition, and as an activity transcendent of material particularity.[18]

The second way in which metaphysical and existential transcendence may be linked is by coming to see that the world has a basic ontological structure that unites it, and out of which beings emerge as entities to which existence has been given, one may make something of the idea that what experience introduces us to, and what metaphysics confirms, is that reality is not something unknowable behind an opaque barrier; and nor is it essentially different from what we observe of our surroundings and ourselves. Seen as realities, other human beings emerge as co-knowers, other animal species as co-inhabitors, and the world more broadly as a community of beings, no doubt often sources of competition and of danger but neither perplexing appearances not unknowable substances. Metaphysics in the tradition I have been recommending has the potential to induce a kind of spiritual transcendence by confirming that the world is real, and that it is the place of our first being, but with the further hint that there may be more in store and that this might provide some kind of intellectual and existential completion by uniting us with the source of being itself.

[18] The previous eight paragraphs overlap with the final section of an essay on the subject of ontological nature of mental acts: 'The Metaphysics of Intellect(ion)' in M. Baur (ed.) *Intelligence and the Philosophy of Mind*, Proceedings of the ACPA, Vol. 80, 2006 (Charlottesville, VA.: Philosophy Documentation Center, 2007).

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