
History, Tradition, and Truth

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My purpose in this paper is to raise a question about the adequacy of a position, apparently held by a significant number of prominent contemporary Thomists (e.g., Josef Pieper, Jacques Maritain, Bernard Lonergan, and Ralph McInerny), concerning how natural truths are discovered.¹ This position has a strong claim to being considered *the* traditional Thomistic approach to truth. By "approach," I mean something wider and vaguer than "definition," "concept" or "notion." The abstract definition of truth as *adequatio* may be essentially correct and a clear distinction between discovery (*inventio*) and learning (*disciplina*) may be truly indispensable for providing an account of our coming to know the truth.² Even so, the historical appropriations of this definition and this distinction may, nonetheless, be seriously limited and (what is worse) philosophically limiting. By the "traditional Thomistic approach to truth," then, I mean the way Thomas's own understanding of what truth is and how truth is discovered has been articulated and defended over six centuries by thinkers committed to the tradition bearing his name. In this articulation and defense, certain dominant emphases have emerged. More often than not, these have arisen in a polemical context in which one or more of Thomas's assertions about some aspect of truth were being (at least, by implication) challenged or criticized. The emphasis to which I shall attend concerns not what truth is but how it is discovered.

Here it is instructive to recall the words of Jacques Maritain: The more closely we examine philosophical controversies, the more fully we realize that

they thrive on a certain number (increasing with the progress of time) of basic themes to which each newly arriving philosopher endeavors to give some kind of place . . . in his own system [or outlook], while at the same

1. By "natural truth," I simply mean a truth that is, in principle, discoverable by the natural light of human reason.

2. Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestio disputata de veritate*, q. 11, a. 1. Cf. Jacques Maritain, *A Preface to Metaphysics* (New York: Mentor Omega Books, 1962), p. 10; Ralph McInerny, *Thomism in an Age of Renewal* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 41.

time, more often than not, his overemphasis on one of the themes in question causes his system to be at odds with those of his fellow competitors—and with the truth of the matter.³

This insight into philosophical controversies helps us to frame the ideal of philosophical inquiry. As Maritain puts it, “The greater and truer a philosophy, the more perfect the balance between all the ever-recurrent basic themes with whose discordant claims philosophical reflection has to do.”⁴ In the end, philosophical adequacy is judged in terms of properly placed emphases and, we might add, properly drawn distinctions. The relevance of this to our topic is that the traditional Thomistic approach to truth needs to be assessed in terms not merely of its abstract definitions but also in terms of its historical emphases.⁵

For our purposes, the two most important emphases concern reason and truth itself. Traditional Thomists have stressed the capacity of human reason to grasp immutable truths and, thereby, to transcend historical contingencies.⁶ There are weighty and, in my judgment, compelling reasons for this emphasis. Even so, the stress on the immutable character of truth and the transcendent capacity of reason has encouraged a misleading view of tradition, a view quite at odds with the way those who emphasize these points characteristically carry on their intellectual lives.⁷

It is *not* my objective here to show that St. Thomas’s own understanding of truth is unable to illuminate the continuing authority which he himself is accorded in a self-conscious intellectual tradition. Do not

3. Jacques Maritain, *On the Use of Philosophy: Three Essays* (New York: Atheneum, 1965), pp. 29-30.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

5. The work of Gerald McCool, S.J., is indispensable for assessing Thomism in this manner.

6. There are, of course, important voices in the Thomistic tradition who have challenged this emphasis. For example, W. Norris Clarke, S.J., in his Presidential Address to the ACPA in 1969, contended that “we have not yet worked out an explicit philosophical understanding and expression of the nature and limits of human truth, as actually attainable in the concrete, which is adequate to—or sometimes even [merely] compatible with—our lived experience in so many areas of 20th century life and thought” (*Proceedings of the ACPA*, Volume XLIII, edited by George F. McLean, p. 1).

7. I am reminded in this connection of a remark made by Albert Einstein in a piece included in *Ideas and Opinions* (New York: Dell, 1976): “If you want to find out anything from the theoretical physicists about the methods they use, I advise you to stick closely to one principle: don’t listen to their words, fix your attention to their deeds” (p. 264).

suppose that in raising a question I am dismissing a position or a tradition, much less a thinker of Thomas's stature. Quite the contrary. One of my principal hopes is to render plausible the notion that a historical figure attains and continues to exert intellectual authority insofar as that figure is perceived as an inexhaustible resource, a source to which others can go, again and again. It is my contention that the role of traditional authority in the drama of philosophical life is often misunderstood, even by some of the most perceptive and eloquent defenders of tradition. In other words, an important truth about tradition has been obscured by certain traditional emphases regarding truth. This truth is that the authority of tradition is, even in fields like mathematics, physics, and philosophy, more than merely "provisional and preliminary."⁸ This authority is, at least for the traditionalist, enduring or continuing.

Allow me to proceed by offering several personal recollections. These bear directly on the intimate but complex relationship between tradition and truth. Neither seekers of truth nor lovers of wisdom grow on trees; they grow out of traditions. The natural desire for knowledge needs the nurturing community of inquirers. There is, at the heart of any tradition, a personal encounter between, on the one side, individuals who embody that tradition and, on the other, those who do not or at least not yet. These encounters characteristically are face-to-face exchanges in which both moral and intellectual habits (though not necessarily virtues) are exemplified by the older generation and, in some measure, acquired by the younger. Insofar as I have any claim to the title of "philosopher" in its etymological and most authentic sense, it is largely because of my transformative encounter with several undergraduate teachers who were deeply committed to the thought of Saint Thomas.

As an undergraduate, I was encouraged by these teachers to read anything and everything by Ralph McInerny (including his novels!). His *Thomism in an Age of Renewal* was one of the works through which I was introduced to Thomism as a self-conscious philosophical tradition. Some of you might recall that, in this book, Professor Ralph McInerny devotes a chapter to "Philosophy and Tradition." Following the lead of a footnote at the end of this chapter, I discovered Josef Pieper's finely nuanced yet doggedly commonsensical examination of "The Concept of Tradition." This discovery prompted me to move in several directions—back to the writings of that thinker from whom Pieper and McInerny primarily drew their insights and also back to both the dictates of my own reason and the disclosures of my own experience. In other words,

8. McInerny, *Thomism*, p. 42. Here the author is quoting, possibly misquoting, Josef Pieper, "The Concept of Tradition" in *Review of Politics* 20 (1958): 474.

a dialogue was generated by my encounter with Professor McNerny's reflections on tradition and philosophy. In this dialogue, the claims of a tradition were checked against my own experiences and reflections and, in turn, these experiences and reflections were tested against these claims. In short, there was a *mutual* interrogation or cross-examination. At times, this took the form of an inner dialogue; at other times, it took the form of an actual conversation with flesh-and-blood companions.⁹

In preparing to write this paper, one of the first things I did was to reread what both Pieper and McNerny had to say about tradition. I also consulted the writings of other thinkers, paying especially close attention to what other Thomists have said about the topic. Throughout his discussion, McNerny stresses that the reader or listener possesses the resources and criteria by which to judge what is being transmitted in the name of tradition. In fields such as mathematics, physics, and even philosophy, we are not simply at the mercy of our teachers or any other transmitters of tradition; for we have independent access to what they are talking about.¹⁰ They can supply the occasion for us becoming aware of some aspect or domain of reality but never confer upon us our awareness of this reality. This awareness is something we ourselves bring to our attempts to learn or discover the truth. While this awareness or consciousness *is* in one important sense a gift, that is, something we receive from Another, this Other is not one of our kind. Because of this gift, we have within ourselves the resources to see *for ourselves* what others are claiming to be the case. "[I]n principle at least, we could, by attending to those objects independently of the help of others, come to see what, thanks to instruction, we are being led to see."¹¹ A prominent feature of McNerny's eloquent defense of philosophical tradition and the Thomistic tradition in particular is an ennobling appeal to personal experience. If "the main lesson of Empiricism is," as Hegel claims, "that a man must see for himself and feel that he is present in every fact of knowledge which he has to accept,"¹² then a main lesson of traditionalism is that we learn the main lesson of empiricism—that we must see for ourselves.

9. This part of our initiation into tradition might be related to what Maritain calls "fellowship," a word connoting "something positive—positive and elementary—in human relationships. It conjures up the image of traveling companions, who meet here below by chance and journey through life . . . good humoredly, in cordial solidarity and human agreement, or better to say, friendly and cooperative disagreement" (*On the Use of Philosophy*, p. 33). While our intellectual traditions make *cooperative* disagreement possible, intellectual fellowship makes such disagreement endurable and, at least on occasion, delightful.

10. McNerny, *Thomism*, p. 52.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Hegel, *Logic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 61.

In one of his later writings, Jacques Maritain strikes a similar chord when he asserts that:

Given a chance to reveal its own nature, Thomistic philosophy exhibits the gait and demeanor characteristic of all philosophy; a demeanor and gait fully at liberty to confront the real. The philosopher swears fidelity to no person, nor any school—not even, if he is a Thomist, to the letter of St. Thomas and every article of his teaching. He is sorely in need of teachers and of a tradition, but in order for them to teach him to think when he looks at things (which is not as simple as all that), and not, as is the case with the theologian, so that he can assume the whole of this tradition into his thought. Once this tradition has instructed him, he is free of it and makes use of it for his own work. In this sense, he is alone in the face of being; for his job is to think over that which is.¹³

The function of a tradition is to empower us to *think* when we *look* at things, to reflect about whatever we have encountered or might encounter and, as a result of this reflection, to grasp the widest and deepest significance of these encounters. In other words, a tradition enables us to come into full and independent possession of our own intellectual resources, in particular, our ability to attend to the disclosures of our lived experience and our capacity to reflect upon the implications of these experiential revelations.

If we turn to Bernard Lonergan's *Insight* (1957), we are confronted by a variation on this theme, albeit a variation in which the autonomy of the knower is perhaps even more decisively stressed than in either McInerny or Maritain. According to Lonergan,

the issues in philosophy cannot be settled by looking up a handbook, by appealing to a set of experiments performed so painstakingly by so-and-so, by referring to the masterful presentation of overwhelming evidence in some famous work. Philosophic evidence is within the philosopher himself. It is his own inability to avoid experience, to renounce intelligence in inquiry, to desert reasonableness in reflection. It is his own detached, disinterested desire to know. . . . It is his own grasp of the dialectical unfolding of his own desire to know in its conflict with other desires that provides the key to his own philosophic development. . . . Philosophy is the flowering of the individual's rational consciousness in its coming to know and take possession of itself. To that event, its traditional schools, its treatises, and its history are but contributions; and without that event they are stripped of real significance.¹⁴

13. Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of Garonne*, trans. Michael Cuddihy and Elizabeth Hughes (New York: Macmillan Company, 1968), p. 161.

14. Bernard Lonergan S.J., *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 429.

What each of these Thomists is underscoring in his own way is an important implication of a truth articulated by Thomas himself and discoverable in our own experience as learners. As Maritain reminds us, human beings are, in the Thomistic view of human teaching, social animals primarily because they are in need of teaching; “and the teacher’s art, like the doctor’s, co-operates with nature, so that the *principal agent* in the art of instruction is not the teacher imparting knowledge to his pupil and producing it in his mind, but the understanding, the intellectual vitality of the pupil who receives[,] that is to say, assimilates, the knowledge actively into his mind and so brings knowledge to birth there.”¹⁵ Just as the organism is the principal source of its own recovery, so the understanding is the principal source of its own discoveries.

But the irony here is that, when I turned to my own experience and reason (when I turned to the sources to which Pieper, McInerney, Maritain, and Lonergan invited me to turn in order to assess the validity of what is being handed down), what these personal sources of intellectual illumination revealed about themselves is their inadequacy to perform the role demanded of them by these defenders of tradition who were also champions of reason. Did I not feel compelled to go back, once again, to authors and, indeed, texts I had read numerous times before? And was not this feeling rooted in my own experience of fallibility and nurtured by my reflections on the practical implications of my own finite, fallible nature? This suggested to me that a philosophical tradition is not a ladder we kick away after using it to ascend to the truth, enjoying the perspective provided by the catbird seat.

If I reflect upon my own practice as a philosopher, and if I observe how others (especially those who possess the humility or self-effacement to identify themselves by the name of another thinker—for example, Thomists, Heideggerians, or Deweyans) undertake the task of philosophy, what I conclude is that a living philosophical tradition is an *ongoing* dialogue between, on the one side, the claims of this tradition and, on the other, the disclosures of my own experience and the dictates of my own reason. In this dialogue, neither side is absolutely or unqualifiedly privileged: what I am able to see only with the help of others is never totally eclipsed by what I am able to see for myself.

Recall what we noted earlier, namely, that the adequacy of a philosophical outlook is to be judged in terms of whether its emphases are properly placed and its distinctions are properly drawn. My argument has been simply that the emphasis on the transcendent capacity of human reason (*i.e.*, the ability of reason to rise above the contingencies

15. Jacques Maritain, *Preface to Metaphysics*, p. 10.

of history) and the immutable character of some truths needs to be balanced by an emphasis on the historical rootedness of this reason and on the corrigible nature of our judgments. It is one thing to acknowledge a truth; it is quite another to accord a truth the place it deserves within our lookout. If we reflect, in the light of our own practice of philosophizing, upon the traditional roots of virtually all philosophical reflection and also upon the fallible nature of our own intellectual resources, we need to highlight our *continuing* dependency upon some intellectual tradition, even if it is not the one in which we were brought up. "Tradition as authority fulfills its role," according to McNerny, "by a flourish and exit."¹⁶ Insofar as philosophy is a matter of demonstration in the strict sense, it is true that tradition as authority fulfills its role in this way; however, insofar as philosophy is an affair of interpretation, a struggle to make sense out of our experience, the authority of tradition is never merely provisional or preliminary. The emphasis upon demonstrative knowledge rather than hermeneutical understanding is partly responsible for our underrating of tradition and our exaggeration of the degree of autonomy from tradition which reason is able to attain.

Speaking of Socrates, McNerny notes that: "At one time he subjected himself to a philosophical tradition; later he modified what he had accepted to the point where he could say that he had repudiated his philosophical origins. There is a pattern here which shows up again and again in the great philosophers and, in however a modest way, in the philosophical growth of each of us."¹⁷ But this is only part of the story. For when we as individuals have reached the point where we can repudiate these origins, we are confronted with a choice: we can adopt either an ahistorical approach to philosophical questions or a deliberately and self-consciously historical approach. As Michael McCarthy notes in *The Crisis of Philosophy*, tradition "is the *willed* inheritance of the past that illumines the present and future."¹⁸ Antitraditionalism, itself a tradition going back to Bacon and Descartes, is the *willed rejection* of the past as authoritative. Pierre Duhem contended that: "It is easy to break a tradition, but not so easy to renew it."¹⁹ It is perhaps less easy than we suppose either to break a tradition or to break *with* tradition.

"The opposite of a correct statement is," as Neils Bohr has pointed out, "a false statement. But the opposite of a profound truth may well be

16. McNerny, *Thomism*, p. 44.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

18. Michael McCarthy, *The Crisis of Philosophy* (Albany, New York: SUNY press, 1990), p. 170 (emphasis added).

19. Pierre Duhem, *The Aim and Structure of Physical Theory* (New York: Atheneum, 1962), p. 313.

another profound truth." The opposite of the truth concerning the capacity of our minds to see for themselves, to transcend the contingencies of history and their dependency on the instruction of others, is the truth concerning tradition as an ongoing dialogue in which there occurs a mutual interrogation of what we claim to be able to see for ourselves and what others claim to be real whether we see it or not. In the final analysis, I judge what is so on the basis of what is revealed by my reason and through my experience. This emphasis is linked to the radical responsibility I must take for my own intellectual life. It also brings into view one of the most important bases of my dignity as a person.

But my judgments are responsible only to the extent that, in framing them, I have sought the counsel of others. As Thomas reminds us with his characteristic simplicity, it is part of wisdom to seek counsel. This does not, of course, mean soliciting anybody and everybody for their "opinion." It does mean having the courage and humility to expose our judgments to the criticism of those whom we deem to be wise.²⁰

What Thomas himself did not need to emphasize in his time—because it went without saying—might need to be especially stressed in our own day—because it is rejected without thinking. This is nothing other than the *enduring* authority of our intellectual tradition, an authority from which we can never completely extricate ourselves. In the earlier stages of our adult development, we are preoccupied with taking full possession of our unique talents; in the later stages, our concern is with what has been called generativity. In the former, the focus is on taking responsibility for oneself; in the latter, it is on taking responsibility for one's tradition. We are disposed to assume responsibility for our traditions out of a sense of gratitude for the graciousness by which we were empowered to think for ourselves. A living tradition—and how could a tradition be living if the claims of the past did not have the power continuously to re-assert themselves?—depends upon the omnipresent willingness to go back, time and again, to what was uttered generations ago. In this willingness, we see exemplified the compatibility of thinking *for oneself* and thinking with *others*. To think for ourselves does not require that we think by ourselves (*i.e.*, in isolation from others). Quite the contrary. To think for myself is, if conscientiously undertaken, to think

20. If there is a "hermeneutical circle," there also appears to be a *critical circle*. We turn to those whom we deem wise and, in doing so, appear to be caught in a circle. But, if we take history seriously, then it is possible to see how the passage of time provides the opportunities to shuttle back and forth from the advice of others to the disclosures of our own experience. This ongoing, mutual dialogue, involving moments of cross-examination, is precisely the aspect of our involvement in tradition that, in this paper, I have tried to bring into focus.

with others, both others now living and long dead. In the abiding disposition to return continuously to my intellectual elders and, then, to weigh carefully what they have to say, I reveal myself to be a traditionalist. To see the authority of tradition as merely provisional and preliminary is, in effect, to endorse a *rationalist* conception of tradition. In opposition to such a conception, I have been arguing for a *traditionalist* conception of reason, one in which the link between reason and tradition is seen as essential not only at the outset but throughout the entirety of our fallible lives as rational animals. In terms of this conception, coming-to-know is far more of a communal and historical process than is fully recognized.

The thinkers with whom I have been in a sense arguing would, no doubt, readily grant this point. *Our* task is to be careful that, in our philosophical outlooks, each of “the ever-recurrent themes” (to use Maritain’s expression once again) receives its due. My question is: Has the traditional emphasis on the transcendent capacity of human reason (the ability of us to see for ourselves and, thereby, to transcend our dependency on others) deflected our attention away from the ineradicably traditional character of all human knowing and coming-to-know? If this is so, then does this not point to the need for consulting those other philosophical perspectives (*e.g.*, pragmatism and hermeneutics) in which the communal, interpretive, historical, and even political dimensions of coming-to-know have been stressed? To acknowledge this need might help us to see more clearly that we are always in the position of learners and, thus, never free from the authority of tradition. For a Thomist, such an insight should be welcome.

The future of Thomism will be, as it has been, an ongoing dialogue in which fallible inquirers try to discover ever more nuanced and effective ways to apply the measure of the real to their judgments about reality.