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Standing on the Shoulders of Giants to Refine Gilson’s Teaching about Christian Philosophy*

Introduction: Generic Definition of Philosophy as an Individual and Cultural Enterprise

As the title of my paper suggests, so as to make it more precisely intelligible, my chief aim in this presentation is to call upon the research of some exceptional scholars to make some refinements to Étienne Gilson’s teaching about the nature of Christian philosophy. The first of

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these scholars, or intellectual giants, is the great American educator, and Gilson's friend, Mortimer J. Adler and two statements he noted Aristotle had made about investigation of truth as, always and everywhere, a culturally- and individually generated "doable human deed"¹: 1) "The investigation of the truth is, in one way hard, in another easy. An indication of this is found in the fact that no one is able to attain the truth adequately, while, on the other hand, we do not collectively fail, but everyone says something true about the nature of things, and, while individually we contribute little or nothing to the truth, by the union of all a considerable amount is amassed."² 2) "It is necessary [...] to call into council the views of those of our predecessors [...] in order that we may profit by whatever is sound in their suggestions and avoid their errors."³

At least by implication, Adler understood Aristotle to be saying that, by nature, in its generic definition, philosophy is chiefly a cooperative-and-transgenerational, individual and cultural, psychological enterprise (or a transgenerational, organizational, psychological habit: a co-operative habit of an individual human soul and, analogously considered, a cultural, educational one). In understanding philosophy in this way, Adler would have recognized himself to be agreeing with St. Bernard of Chartres that philosophy is a cultural enterprise in which, to enter, and progress, "like dwarfs," we need to

¹ Mortimer J. Adler, "Philosophy's Past, Present, and Future," *The Great Ideas Online*, 899 (January 2017), p. 6. For a more detailed discussion of this topic, see Adler *The Four Dimensions of Philosophy: Metaphysical, Moral, Objective, Categorical* (New York: Macmillan, 1993).

² Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W. D. Ross, in Richard Mc Keon (ed.), *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), Bk. 2, ch., 1, 993b1–993b4. Cited after Adler.

³ Aristotle, *On the Soul*, Bk. 1, ch. 2, trans. J. A. Smith, in Richard Mc Keon (ed.), *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, 404a20–23. Cited after Adler.

“stand on the shoulders of giants” (a statement historically attributed to Bernard by John of Salisbury).⁴

History as a Philosophical Laboratory that Measures Philosophically Doable Deeds, or Exercise of Philosophy

Evident from Gilson's periodic use of the term 'enterprise' generically to define philosophical activity and of history as a laboratory measure of truth of philosophical claims, he had concurred with Adler on this point so strongly that he had considered historically testing philosophical (that is, psychological) claims (assertions made through a human soul) to be a first principle for recognizing cultural exercise of philosophy. Were this not the case, how do we explain the nature of Gilson's masterful monograph, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*? Within this work, after engaging in several failed historical experiments in which Gilson wonders how many such tests will have to be conducted “before men gain some philosophical experience,” like a good psychologist, Gilson diagnoses the principal cause of contemporary Western philosophical disorders as the psychological one of attempting to think and choose the way we wish instead of thinking and choosing the way we can.⁵

⁴ Ralph M. McInerny, *A History of Western Philosophy*, vol. 2, *Philosophy from St. Augustine to Ockham* (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, Ind. and London, United Kingdom, 1970), 160.

⁵ Étienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965, first published in 1937), 59. This work was reprinted by Ignatius Press (San Francisco, 1999), with a “Foreword” by Desmond J. FitzGerald. See also Gilson's 1931-1932 University of Aberdeen Gifford Lectures (published in French as *L'esprit de la philosophie médiévale* ([Paris, J. Vrin, 1932] and in English as *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* [New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932])).

How Early in the French Debates about Christian Philosophy Gilson Adopted a Maritainian Distinction Historically to Apprehend Philosophically Doable Deeds

As Gilson tells us in his metaphysical/aesthetic masterpiece, *Painting and Reality*, we predicate the term “possible” in two ways: in a first sense to refer to conceptual thinkability in which “we call possible whatever is not intrinsically impossible—that is, any object whose notion is not self-contradictory”; and, “in a second sense [...] we call possible whatever, after being conceived by the mind, can be made to exist in reality”: a really doable deed.⁶

While Gilson does not say so explicitly within the context of the passages cited in the text, the first understanding of “possible” corresponds to an abstract psychological act: the abstract mode of speculative, conceptual consideration about essences in which Aristotelian logicians tend to engage. The second conforms to a concrete psychological act: the actual way of considering that human beings tend to use when thinking about alternative choices, such as whether or not to undertake a given action is a doable human deed. While, abstractly considered, a thing, or action, might be psychologically conceivable in principle and nature, concretely considered, and in actuality and strictly speaking, it might not be able to exist, or be doable for anyone, or any culture or civilization, at anytime, anywhere (for example, strictly speaking, practice of Christian philosophy by an ancient, pagan Greek philosopher).

⁶ Étienne Gilson, *Painting and Reality*, vol. 4 of the A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts (New York: Published for the Bollingen Foundation by Pantheon Books, vol. XXXV in the Bollingen Series, 1958), 158.

This distinction about two concepts of “possible” is crucial to note because Gilson: 1) repeatedly uses it to weave together different scenarios within *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* to transform this work from a tale of disparate psychological experiments in philosophical activity into a powerful, organic, whole book in philosophical history; and 2) early in the Christian philosophy debates that had started in France during the first few decades of the twentieth century and later, Gilson would refer to this twofold distinction in terms coined by Jacques Maritain of the difference between the: 1) “order of specification”; and 2) “order of exercise.”

In support of the first of the two claims that I have just made about these two different understandings of “possible” (abstract and logical as opposed to concrete and real) and the way they refer to the orders of specification and exercise, consider what Gilson says about telling the historical tale of intellectual experiments that he had entitled *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*:

The philosophical events which have been described in the previous chapters cannot be wholly understood in the sole light of biography, of literary history, or even of the history of the systems in which they can be observed. They point rather to the fact that, in each instance of philosophical thinking, both the philosopher and his particular doctrine are ruled from above by an impersonal necessity. In the first place, philosophers are free to lay down their own sets of principles, but once this is done, they no longer think the way they wish—they think the way they can. In the second place, it seems to result from the facts under discussion, that any attempt on the part of a philosopher to shun the consequences of his own position is doomed to failure. What he himself declines to say will be said by his disciples, if he has any; if he has none, it may eternally remain unsaid, but it is there, and anybody going back to the same principles, be it several centuries later, will have to face the same conclusions. It seems, therefore, that though philosophical ideas

can never be found separate from philosophers and their philosophies, they are, to some extent, independent of philosophers and well as of their philosophies, taken in their naked, impersonal necessity of both their contents and their relations. The history of these concepts and their relationships is the history of philosophy itself. Philosophy consists in the concepts of philosophers, taken in their naked impersonal necessity of both their contents and their relations. The history of these concepts and their relations is the history of philosophy itself.⁷

As far as my second claim (that Gilson would refer to this twofold distinction in terms coined by Jacques Maritain of the difference between the: 1) “order of specification”; and 2) “order of exercise”), in his *An Essay on Christian Philosophy*, Maritain directly quotes Gilson’s *Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* as agreeing with Maritain on this point:

Consider any given philosophic system. Now ask if it is ‘Christian,’ and if so by what characteristics you can recognize it as such? From the observer’s standpoint it is a philosophy, therefore a work of reason. The author is a Christian and yet his Christianity, however telling its influence on his philosophy has been, remains essentially distinct from it. The only means at our disposal for detecting this inner action is to compare this data which we can outwardly observe. The philosophy without revelation and the philosophy with revelation. This is what I have attempted to do. And since history alone is capable of performing this task, I have stated that history alone can give meaning to the concept of Christian philosophy. [...] I may say, then, that Christian philosophy is an objectively observable reality for history alone, but that once its existence has been thus established, its notion may be analyzed in itself.

⁷ Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, 301–302.

This ought to be done as Mr. J. Maritain has done it; I am in fact in complete agreement with him.⁸

Some Observations and Claims about Principles Gilson had Used Historically to Test Philosophical Activity

What is striking about the different historical reoccurrences of philosophical inexperience that Gilson recounts in his philosophical thriller, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, is: 1) Gilson's own many failed attempts over several decades precisely to explain the meaning of "Christian philosophy" to himself and to others; and 2) what chiefly caused these failed attempts to happen.

As a case in point, moving on to consider the first of several observations and claims about principles Gilson had used historically to test philosophical activity, Gilson had firmly accepted Aristotle's claim that small mistakes made about first principles in the beginning of an investigation tend to multiply many times as the study continues.⁹ A chief reason I say Gilson had firmly accepted this claim is because he repeatedly applies this principle in his *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* as his historical laboratory-measure of philosophical legitimacy.

Second, striking about the different historical reoccurrences of philosophical inexperience that Gilson recounts in this work are some similarities and differences between them and several other historical

⁸ Jacques Maritain, *An Essay on Christian Philosophy*, trans. Edward H. Flannery (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955), x, n. 1.

⁹ Aristotle, *On the Heavens*, trans. J. L. Stocks, in Richard Mc Keon (ed.), *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, Bk. 5, Ch. 1, 271b 9–10.

events: 1) Gilson's many failed attempts over several decades precisely to explain the meaning of 'Christian philosophy' and the many incarnations his definition underwent; 2) what chiefly caused these failed attempts to happen; 3) how Gilson reacted to these failures; and 4) something crucial we can learn from his philosophical failures about the nature of philosophical, scientific, failure in general.

Some Chief Causes for Gilson's Many Failed Attempts Precisely to Explain the Meaning of 'Christian Philosophy' to Himself and to Others

As anyone who has studied Gilson's many tries to explain the meaning of 'Christian philosophy' knows, his understanding of Christian philosophy underwent several incarnations. This started on 21 March 1931 when, at a meeting of the *Société française de philosophie*, he and Jacques Maritain had attempted to defend the notion of a Christian philosophy in response to a 1928 article by Émile Bréhier's in which, historically considered, Bréhier had denied its existence.¹⁰ This debate lasted until at least as late as Gilson's 1962 monograph, *The Philosopher and Theology*.

In my opinion, as unbelievable as the following claim might sound, the chief reason for these many failed attempts is that, like all the other leading figures involved in this debate from the start, and like the many intellectuals he had criticized through his psychological/philosophical analysis, Gilson had begun his research short on philosophical experience: he and those debating with him had not adequately comprehended how Aristotle and St. Thomas had understood, precisely defined,

¹⁰ Émile Bréhier, "Y-a-t-il une philosophie chrétienne," *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie*, 31, no. 2 (1931).

'philosophy.' Not having grasped this, the different participants in the debate then claimed to see, or not see, philosophy, and Christian philosophy, to exist, or not exist, within Western intellectual history.

For example, it is well-known that Gilson had assumed something he had called 'philosophy' had historically transitioned as a cultural enterprise from the tail end of ancient Greek culture to medieval Christian culture. His whole laboratory method of testing for philosophy's existence depended upon the historical transitioning of this philosophical enterprise.

As Gilson had understood the historical situation, strictly speaking, ancient Greeks had originated philosophy and medieval Christian culture had inherited what the Greeks had originated. In actuality, no such transitioning had actually taken place. As I have shown in my *Wisdom's Odyssey from Philosophy to Transcendental Sophistry*, before the advent of Christianity, the ancient Greeks had largely lost their understanding of philosophy as thinkers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle had understood it. And the early Church Fathers were not chiefly interested in understanding the nature of the Greek philosophical enterprise considered as such; they were chiefly interested in it for apologetical reasons. Until St. Albert the Great and St. Thomas came on the scene, Catholic intellectuals had generally mistaken philosophy to be one or more of the liberal arts (something they continue to do to this day!).¹¹

In addition, when Gilson had written *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, he had defined precisely and abstractly what Christian culture had inherited from the ancient Greeks, especially from Aristotle, as follows: "Philosophy consists in the concepts of philosophers, taken in their naked impersonal necessity of both their contents and their relations."

¹¹ Peter A. Redpath, *Wisdom's Odyssey from Philosophy to Transcendental Sophistry* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Editions Rodopi, B.V., 1997).

While he had admitted that “philosophical ideas can never be found separate from philosophers and their philosophies” (that is, from existence within a human soul), he had immediately followed this admission with the statement that “to some extent these ideas are independent of philosophers and as well as of their philosophies, taken in their naked, impersonal necessity of both their contents and their relations.” In so doing, he was making clear that he was predicating the term “philosophy” analogously; and when he followed with a specific definition of philosophy, he was making equally clear that, no matter where it existed, he had considered philosophy to be chiefly a logical system of abstract essences, or ideas, and their impersonal, essential relations (not chiefly a psychologically doable deed, not chiefly an act of the human soul, or better, the human person). Furthermore, he was making explicit, “The history of these concepts and their relationships is the history of philosophy itself.”

In other words, Gilson was saying that, once a person knowledgeable about philosophy’s nature sees such a systematic body of knowledge, system of ideas, or set of logical premises existing within history, that person is experiencing philosophical exercise, and philosophical history in the making. He or she is not experiencing philosophy as a pure nature, or abstract essence specified by its abstract essence. He or she is experiencing philosophy being exercised in a specific state, specified by its existential state. Because that which is really actual must be really possible, Gilson saw such experience to be historical evidence of philosophy’s possible state, its possible existence in a soul, be that soul Christian or pagan.¹²

Considered in the way he had described it, philosophy’s pure nature resembles (as Gilson’s colleague Anton C. Pegis had once referred to

¹² Anton C. Pegis, “*Sub Ratione Dei: A Reply to Professor Anderson*,” *New Scholasticism* 39 (1965), 154.

it) “some sort of an Avicennian absolute essence,” existing somewhere apart from the human soul (by virtue, I would add, of its own *esse essentiae*, in a kind of essentialistic limbo, until it eventually re-enters the world of existence [*esse existentiae*] through exercise within a human soul). What is striking about the way Gilson had defined philosophy in 1937 is how un-Aristotelian, un-Thomistic, idealistic, essentialistic, and logicistic it was and sounds; and what is ironic and paradoxical about the way Gilson had defined “philosophy” in this monograph is that the first failed-experiment he mentions in the *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* he entitles “Logicism”!

Especially ironic and paradoxical, about his doing this is that, shortly after writing this work (1937), in 1939, Gilson had published another work, entitled *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*, in which he had claimed, in a much more personalistic and realistic tone, that sense apprehension of the being of singular natures is the first principle of all knowledge, including philosophical knowledge. Considered as such, it is more proximate in nature to philosophical reasoning than the logical principle of non-contradiction, which is a first principle of all logical reasoning, but not of all knowing.¹³

In the process of drawing this conclusion, Gilson had paid special attention to the fact that apprehension of sensible being essentially involves a conjunction of two knowing faculties: universal and particular, or cogitative, reason (*ratio particularis*, or *cogitativa*), which, in human beings, is analogous to the estimative sense (*instinct*) in brute animals.¹⁴ Following St. Thomas, Gilson had maintained that neither

¹³ Étienne Gilson, *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*, trans. Mark A. Wauck (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 197; initially published in French in 1939 by Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin under the title *Réalisme thomiste et critique de la connaissance*.

¹⁴ Étienne Gilson, *Thomist Realism*, 197.

the human intellect nor the senses immediately knows the existence or nature of sensible beings. Instead, the individual person grasps these through a conjunction of universal and particular reason.¹⁵

A chief cause of all Gilson's subsequent, decades-long failures to adequately explain the nature of Christian philosophy to himself and to others, then, appears to me to have been threefold. When first entering this debate: 1) Gilson had misrepresented to himself philosophy as applied by the ancient Greeks chiefly to have been a logical system of ideas, an abstract essence specified as being philosophical by being systematically logical, purely rational (having no conceptual contradictions; for example, not mixing premises of faith and reason); 2) he had accepted and applied Maritain's mistaken understanding of specification by abstract, or pure, essence as an act distinct from, and, in a way, capable of being intelligible without prior reference to specification by exercise; and 3) he appears not explicitly to have realized that, according to Aristotle and St. Thomas, all specification of human activity first exists in the human soul in an order of psychological exercise (a doable deed) in relation to a formal object related to a faculty or habit of the human soul! After so existing, it may then be psychologically transferred by logicians to abstract conceptual consideration of an essence, or definition, without actual and explicit reference to concrete exercise. In short, despite the fact that, at least by 1939,

¹⁵ Étienne Gilson, *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*, 171–215. See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae, Sancti Thomae Aquinatis Doctoris Angelici. Opera Omnia. Iussu Leonis XIII*, Rome: Vatican Polyglot Press, 1882–, 1, q. 78, a. 4; *On Truth*. Trans. Robert W. Mulligan, J. V. McGlynn, and R. W. Schmidt (3 vols., Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1952–1954), q. 2, a. 6, ad 3; *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle*, Bk. 6, lect. 1, nn. 1118 and 1123; lect. 9, nn. 1249 and 1254–1255; *A Commentary on Aristotle's De anima*, trans. Robert Pasnau (New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, 1999), Bk. 3, lect. 745.

Gilson appears to have been explicitly aware of the distinction I am presently making, he appears to have temporarily forgotten that the abstract, logical act of conceptualization and the concrete act of philosophical specification are generically different psychological acts, personal acts involving a human soul as their proximate generator.

Special note should be made here that in this case, contrary to the many philosophical failures he had examined in his *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, Gilson did not blame his defeats on philosophy. Like Socrates, he blamed them on himself. This is a lesson in philosophical experience that Gilson had considered crucial for all aspiring philosophers to learn.

Like any good researcher, scientist, Gilson had realized that philosophical failure is an essential part of specifying a generic nature. By so behaving, through many small failures, progressively over several decades, he was able to jettison his mistaken definition of philosophy's nature as chiefly a system of logical premises, or body of knowledge (or habit of the soul whose formal object is a system of logical premises, or body of knowledge) and more precisely come close properly to specifying its definition as a psychological habit whose genus is not the same as the genus of the logician. Still, from 1939 onward, had he followed the understanding of philosophy that he had started to articulate in *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*, instead of the one he had expressed in *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, he could have improved his understanding of Christian philosophy much sooner, with even fewer failures.

How the Research of Armand A. Maurer Helps Serve as a Midwife to Give Birth to the Fully-Formed Nature of Christian Philosophy

Four years before Gilson's death in 1978, one of his two most-famous students, Armand A. Maurer (the other being Joseph Owens) contributed a much, since then, under-read and under-appreciated article entitled, "The Unity of a Science: St. Thomas and the Nominalists." Had Gilson read this article about fifty years prior to when Maurer had written it, I suspect he would have changed his tactical plan for explaining to himself and to others the nature of Christian philosophy. Likely, what would have jumped out to him from this article would have been two claims by Maurer: that St. Thomas had understood 1) the genus, or subject, of the philosopher to be essentially different from the genus of the logician; and 2) philosophy to be chiefly a psychological habit (a habit of the human soul), not a body, or system, of knowledge; and only secondarily, analogously, to be a logical system, or body of knowledge.

While he did not say so explicitly at the time, strictly speaking, what Maurer was maintaining about philosophy's genus was the opposite of what, for decades, Gilson and Maritain would early on report and emphasize about it in relation to Christian philosophy as a historically observable nature. (Having corresponded with Maurer at this time and until the end of his life, I am convinced he had never explicitly recognized this implication regarding Gilson's and Maritain's teaching regarding Christian philosophy.) According to Maurer, the conception of philosophy as chiefly a system or body of knowledge had originated with William of Ockham and his nominalistic followers, not with St. Thomas Aquinas. He called Ockham "its theoretician and popularizer (p. 271)."

In opposition to the Ockhamist understanding of philosophy, Maurer rightly claimed that St. Thomas had maintained all philosophy,

science, to be chiefly a habit of the soul (a psychological habit) that studies a real genus. A real, philosophical, or scientific, genus, in turn, he noted, consists in some really existing proximate subject abstractly-considered as a generator, proximate cause, of essential accidents (properties).¹⁶

For example, as Fr. Charles Bonaventure Crowley notes, as an essential accident, or property, that a material form requires to have to be able to cause a limited action and, thereby, be complete as a substance, the substantial body generates: 1) dimensive limits to itself as a material substance (that is, it generates a material surface, or figured material, surface-boundary, which serves as the three-dimensional, proximate subject in which really different figures can exist as properties, or essential accidents, creating material boundaries for a substantial body; the substantial body the geometrician studies), and 2) within and through the surface body it has generated, it subsequently generates all qualitative properties that exist in that surface body (such as living organs in a living body) through which a substance, through the internal faculties it generates, is enabled to generate external acts (whose qualitative actions the physicist studies).¹⁷

¹⁶ Armand A. Maurer, "The Unity of a Science: St. Thomas and the Nominalists," in *St. Thomas Aquinas 1274–1974 Commemorative Studies*, vol. 2. Ed.-in-chief, Armand A. Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies: 1974.) See, also, Maurer (trans.), *St. Thomas Aquinas, The Divisions and Methods of the Sciences, Questions V and VI of his Commentary on the de Trinitate of Boethius* (4th rev. edition, vol. 3, St Michael's College Mediaeval Studies in Translation, Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1986), 75, fns. 14 and 15. See, St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Sentences—Book 1: The Mystery of the Trinity*. Trans. Giulio Silano (vol. 42, St Michael's College Mediaeval Translation, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2007), Bk. 1, d. 19, q. 5, a. 2, ad 1; *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, Bk. 5, lect. 22, nn. 1121–11144; Bk. 10, lect. 12, nn. 2142–2144; and *Summa theologiae*, 1, q. 66, a. 2, ad 2 and 88, 2, ad 4.

¹⁷ Peter A. Redpath, "Editor's Prescript," Charles B. Crowley, *Aristotelian-Thomistic Philosophy of Measure and the International System of Units (SI): Correlation of the*

Maurer had noted that this understanding of a genus essentially differs from that of the logician, which, for example, abstractly and univocally signifies the essence of a species (like animal being the genus of man). Instead, the philosophical genus is the proper subject of different species of accidents (essential accidents, properties, like quantity and quality) and cannot properly be conceived apart from considering: 1) the way it exists and 2) its essential relation to the human soul as numerically-one habit within the soul.

If, analogously, we apply Maurer's claim about the existence of these two essentially different kinds of genera (logical and philosophical) as measures of what Maritain and Gilson had repeatedly said until late in their lives regarding the natures of philosophy and Christian philosophy as historically-observable realities, it is reasonable to conclude that, at least by implication of his principles, when they talked about philosophy and Christian philosophy, Maurer would be accusing Maritain and Gilson of reporting an analogous and secondary, nominalistic, understanding of philosophy and Christian philosophy.

Opposed to this analogous understanding, Maurer claimed St. Thomas had maintained, "Each of the speculative sciences has its own generic subject, or formal object, conceived through its unique mode of abstraction. Each science also has its own principles and mode of procedure, which produce in the intellect a *habitus* distinct from that of every other philosophy."¹⁸

Considered as such, Maurer added, a science is numerically one habit of the soul (a psychological habit!) generated by repeated acts

International System of Units with the Philosophy of Aristotle and St. Thomas, ed. with a prescript by Peter A. Redpath (Lanham, Md., New York, and London, United Kingdom: University Press of America, 1996), xii–xviii.

¹⁸ Maurer, "The Unity of a Science: St. Thomas and the Nominalists," 291.

of a formal object, or subject genus, on the habit!¹⁹ That is, essentially considered, Maurer was saying that St. Thomas had: 1) generically considered philosophy, science, to be chiefly a psychological habit whose formal object, or subject (external stimulus), is always some abstractly considered, composite, organizational whole; and 2) specifically considered divisions within this philosophical, or scientific, genus, to be psychological habits whose formal object, subject, is also always some abstractly considered, composite, organizational whole; philosophically, or scientifically, differentiated by the chief habitual interest, *ratio*, or aim, in relation to which it intellectually considers the organizational whole it studies.

For example, the sciences of biology and medicine are specifically differentiated as generic sciences of the human heart insofar as one (medicine) is habitually interested in and aims at studying the heart chiefly as health-generating while the other (biology) is habitually interested in and aims at studying the heart chiefly as life-generating. Until the time of his death, I do not think Maurer ever fully comprehended that, based upon the way he was interpreting St. Thomas's teaching about philosophy, he had issued in a radically new understanding of philosophy as an organizational psychology. As a habit of the soul, philosophy is essentially a psychology. As a habit whose formal object is a generic organization of species, philosophy is specified as an organizational psychology!

Concisely put, just like any human habit, Maurer was saying that specification of a philosophy, or science, is determined by a chief habitual interest in some qualitatively different act that some qualitatively different organizational whole proximately causes or generates. Real, generic habits are always specified by their acts. And their acts

¹⁹ Maurer, "The Unity of a Science," 271–274.

are always specified by their formal objects: external stimuli, or chief aims. (Hence, the generically common habit of athletics becomes specified as the athletic habit of tennis or golf by the qualitatively different ways human muscles are habituated to harmonize to generate different physical acts to achieve qualitatively different chief athletic aims.)

As is evident from what St. Thomas says toward the start of his *Summa theologiae* (1, q. 1, a. 7, *respondeo*) about the nature of the subject, or formal object, of a science, Maurer was right. There, St. Thomas states, “[T]he subject of a science is related to the science just as an object is related to a faculty or habit.”²⁰ That is, the subject, or formal object, of a science considered as a psychological habit (*habitus*) relates to a scientific habit of the human soul just as an external stimulus, like a sound, relates to the faculty of hearing. Considered as such, it is the formal object, external stimulus, of a psychological habit, a habit of the human soul, that is generically different from the formal object of the psychological habits of logic and history!

In making this reference to Maurer, in no way am I stating, implying, or insinuating that Maritain and Gilson did not understand that St. Thomas had maintained philosophy, science, to be numerically one psychological habit, a habit of the human soul. Nevertheless, I am explicitly maintaining that, in talking about philosophy and Christian philosophy, Maritain and Gilson had repeatedly failed to report, emphasize, what St. Thomas chiefly had meant by a philosophical, or scientific, genus.

I am asserting that, not only did Maritain and Gilson repeatedly not precisely report and emphasize what St. Thomas chiefly had meant by a philosophical, or scientific, genus, for decades they had tended to convolute his understanding, reverse it, and sublimate it to an analo-

²⁰ “[S]e habet subjectum ad scientiam sicut objectum ad potentiam vel habitum.”

gous caricature in which philosophy's formal object was no longer an acting subject abstractly considered as an organizational whole, or real genus, generating, through the harmonious action of its internally-existing specific parts, numerically one organizational action. Instead, it became a static body of knowledge, or system of logical premises. By so doing, they tended to reduce St. Thomas's dynamic and concrete understanding of philosophy as an organizational psychology of organizational operation, or habit of studying organizational operations, into a static caricature: contemplation of abstractly considered essences. Decades later, Gilson would indirectly lament what he and Maritain had been doing, somewhat unwittingly, at the time: "Generation after generation of Schoolmen have mistaken the order of concepts in the mind for the order of things in reality."²¹

In criticizing Maritain's report of the nature and state of philosophy with which Gilson had initially agreed, I am not denying as licit the distinction between "the order of specification" and "the order of exercise." Nor am I claiming that Maritain and Gilson were totally oblivious to philosophy's dynamic nature as I have just defined it.

I admit the distinction and deny that Maritain had properly tended to report and emphasize it. I maintain that, always and everywhere, specification of a real genus first occurs in the order of exercise. Once it exists there, logicians and others can analogously transpose it and think about in terms of an abstract essence. Precisely because it is chiefly a habit of the rational soul, philosophical nature is never, and can never be, specified as an absolute nature (like a Platonic form or Avicennian essence) existing apart from the human soul in some order of specification existing separate from the exercise of real, individual, human sense rationality.

²¹ Étienne Gilson, "In Quest of Species," Armand A. Maurer (ed.), *Three Quests for Philosophy* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, The Étienne Gilson Series, 31, 2008), 62.

As proof of this claim, I call as my witness what St. Thomas says in his famous “Treatise on Man” (1, q. 77, a. 3, *respondeo*) of his *Summa theologiae* about the specification of human rationality wherein, to the possible shock to some readers, he locates the specific difference of our human rationality in a per se otherness within the sensitive, or animal, part of the intellectual soul, which is sometimes found with and sometimes without reason! As a quality essentially existing as an accidental property within human rationality, like human rationality, like all divisions of a really-existing genus, philosophical rationality must be specified as animal rationality within its really existing genus: the sense, or animal, part of the human soul.²²

I am explicitly maintaining that, in talking about philosophy and Christian philosophy, Maritain and Gilson had repeatedly failed to report what St. Thomas chiefly had meant by a philosophical, or scientific, genus. I am explicitly claiming that St. Thomas had understood philosophy chiefly to be a habit of the soul whose formal object is an abstractly considered real genus, or generically-conceived substance: what today we would call an “operational, or dynamic, organization,” an organization abstractly considered as a proximate generator of action. Only secondarily, in an analogous sense, did he consider philosophy to be a “body of knowledge,” “system of logical premises,” or “systematic logic.”

²² St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1, q. 77, a. 3 *respondeo*: “Sed tamen considerandum est quod ea quae sunt per accidens, non diversificant speciem. Quia enim coloratum accidit animali, non diversificantur species animalis per differentiam coloris, sed per differentiam eius quod per se accidit animali, per differentiam scilicet animae sensitivae, quae quandoque invenitur cum ratione, quandoque sine ratione. Unde rationale et irrationale sunt differentiae divisivae animalis, diversas eius species constituentes. Sic igitur non quaecumque diversitas obiectorum diversificat potentias animae; sed differentia eius ad quod per se potentia respicit.”

While, to my knowledge, no other student of St. Thomas before me has ever maintained the following to be the case, what is crucial to understand about the real subject genus St. Thomas conceived as a division of philosophy to study is that it is one hierarchically-ordered, composite whole comprised of many qualitatively unequal species ranging from most to least perfect in relation to possession of some chief mode of existing, being-one, and acting. Philosophy always studies the problem of the One and the Many in terms of part/whole relations. The subject genus of a philosophy is an organizational, or ordered, whole divided by contrary opposites (many species) unequally, more or less perfectly, possessing some, one generic act. This generic act, moreover, exists within the species as a principle of unequal relation uniting them together to bring this generic act to unity and perfection as their numerically-one end!

For example, 1) the one generic habit of medicine studies contrary opposites of the most and the least perfect possession of one subject genus, health (ranging in species [the many] from most perfect health to most diseased) with the chief aim of maintaining and perfecting bodily health and driving out bodily disease; 2) economics studies the contrary opposites of the most and the least perfect possession of wealth (maximally wealthy and maximally poor [the many]) for maintaining and perfecting economic wealth and driving out economic poverty; 3) ethics studies the contrary opposites of moral virtue and vice (the most and the least prudential acts of choice [the many]) for the chief aim of maintaining and perfecting prudent choice and driving out imprudent choice in the individual situation; and 4) politics studies the contrary opposites of peace and war (the most and least perfect acts of social, personal relations [the many]) for the chief aim of maintaining and perfecting peace and driving out conflict within a political community.

Given the glaring nature of St. Thomas's teaching about the subject of a science or a division of philosophy, someone might easily and reasonably wonder how a scholar as familiar with his works as Gilson could have for so long somewhat misrepresented St. Thomas's teaching about the natures of philosophy and Christian philosophy?

Actually, I think Gilson always had at least a generic sense of this truth, and that what we first perceive are real genera and species, not totally discrete individuals, or simply wholes unrelated to parts—but organizational wholes. How else are we to account for the startling claims he makes in his 1972 lectures entitled “In Quest of Species” (later edited into a monograph by Maurer) in which, in answer to the question, “What do we perceive first: wholes or their parts?,” Gilson states:

Aristotle answers: neither, and I think he was right. ‘What is plain and obvious to us, at first,’ he says, ‘is rather confused masses, the elements and principles of which become later known to us by analysis.’ Remarkably enough, the Philosopher then adds that because it begins with the senses, knowledge must proceed from generalities to particulars, ‘for it is a whole that is best known to sense perception, and a generality is a kind of whole, comprehending within it many things, like parts.’ I said ‘remarkably enough’ because of the trite saying *sensus est particularius, intellectus est universalium*. We only perceive individuals, we only know universals, or, more correctly perhaps, individuals are objects of sense perception, universals are objects of intellectual cognition.²³

Since the epistemological Gordian Knot Gilson was trying to untie was complicated, he continued his attempt to unravel it by noting an

²³ Gilson, “In Quest of Species,” 37–38.

apparent contradiction related to it, which he immediately attempted to resolve. If we really do not see species, how do we account for the fact that we say things such as we see a horse, man, and so on?

In the tradition of Aristotle and the Scholastics as he had understood them, Gilson answered:

What I perceive by sense is in itself something particular, but my perception of it is something confused. By observing it more closely, and analyzing it, reason forms a clearer notion of it. Seen from a distance, what I see is some thing. If it gets nearer, I see an animal; still nearer, a man. Finally, I see John or Peter. In the end, I think I am perceiving by sense, not the sensible qualities of the object, but its very nature. Of course, that is largely an illusion; but there is some truth in it, and in his commentary on Aristotle's *De anima*, Thomas Aquinas says why that illusion is justified up to a point. Both the same man, the same soul, perceive by the senses and conceive by the intellect. One should not say that our senses perceive this and our intellect conceives that, but rather that men know by sense and intellect. The two modes of knowledge communicate in the unity of the knowing subject. In Thomas' own words, "Taken at its summit, man's power of sensing somehow participates in understanding because in man sense is conjoined to intellect." In short, because I know that what I am perceiving is a dog, I say I see a dog. In so doing, I merely say that I see what I know I am seeing.²⁴

While what Gilson says about the fact that we human beings actually perceive real genera and species is, in part, quite profound (so profound that I think it had influenced Fr. Maurer's article "The Unity of the Sciences: St. Thomas and the Nominalists" that he wrote a few years later), nonetheless, it could have been even more profound and

²⁴ Gilson, "In Quest of Species," 38–39.

precisely accurate had he considered what he was saying against the background footnote appearing on page twenty of his monograph *Painting and Reality*: “Order is the only kind of unity that multiplicity can receive.”²⁵

Had he done so, and had he added to that statement the observations that: 1) the only way a multiplicity can receive order is by becoming parts of an organizational whole, and 2) the only way a multiplicity can be transformed from a disparate multitude into parts of an organizational whole is through unequally and co-operatively-generating numerically one aim, or co-operative organizational act, I think he would have revised his analysis of what he had claimed Aristotle had given as an answer to the question, “What do we perceive first: wholes or their parts?” For, in answer to this question, neither Aristotle nor St. Thomas would have replied, “Neither.” They would have replied, “Both.” As both had realized, along with Gilson, what we first, and can only, perceive is an existing unity. If something does not exist, if it does not possess the act of existing as an actual unity, or whole, we cannot know it.

What we first, and always, perceive, and later wonder about as sensible, philosophical subjects, are acting subjects—numerically one organizational wholes: individually-existing, operational organizations; qualitatively-different, acting organizations; numerically one organizational generators of action organizationally unified through unequal, and harmonious, relation to numerically one final act. In short, what we first, and always, perceive is a unity of order. And ordered unity can only exist within a multitude of parts unequally contributing to generating numerically one organizational harmony through execution, exercise, of numerically one co-operative action.

²⁵ Gilson, *Painting and Reality*, 20, fn. 17.

In perceiving this or that, in a confounded, or conflated, way, we are perceiving a harmoniously acting, composite-unity, qualitatively different from some other harmoniously acting composite-unity. We first perceive things by sensing a harmonious unity, order, within a multitude, of harmoniously ordered parts constituting an organizational whole.

Consequently, Gilson cannot possibly be correct when he says that, first, we confusedly perceive a sensory whole and, later, through intellectual analysis, we discover its principles. We sensibly induce the whole in and through simultaneously sensing and conceiving its principles as co-operative parts, sources, of a qualitatively different, real organizational unity: a real organizational harmony. We perceive the real, numerically one whole simultaneously in and through perceiving its real organizational principles of action.

Despite claims to the contrary, as Sir Francis Bacon had correctly realized centuries ago, and St. Thomas had recognized when talking about different species of psychological abstraction, induction is not chiefly an act of logic, and it does not start with a confused perception.²⁶ It is an intellectual/sensory act of perceiving a one in a many—confounding, not confusing, in a single perception, awareness of a qualitatively unique harmony existing within a multitude of essentially co-operating parts: an organizational whole operating within its parts to generate an organizational unity. Considered as such, it precedes reasoning, logic! Upon perceptual and conceptual induction of this harmonious unity, all species of philosophical, scientific-

²⁶ Sir Francis Bacon, *Novum organum*, “Aphorisms,” in *Novum organum*. <https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/bacon-novum-organum> (First published in London, England by Bonham Norton and John Bill, 1620), 14 and 82.

ic, wonder essentially depend, as a *per se*, or *per aliud, notum*, principle of all subsequent philosophical, scientific, activity. Right reason starts with right induction!

Hence, my answer about how a scholar as familiar with his works as Gilson could have for so long somewhat misrepresented St. Thomas's teaching about the natures of philosophy and Christian philosophy is that, from the start of this debate, Maritain and Gilson had been considering the nature of philosophy chiefly from the perspective of historians and logicians, not from the perspective of historians and philosophers. The tactical plan they had chiefly chosen to use to demonstrate to their doubting audiences (largely consisting of nominalistic logicians) the reality of Christian philosophy was to adopt a method similar to archeologists and systematic, dialectical, logicians: To show them through the fossil records of a once-living species how a new species had appeared within Western and global cultural geography, surpassing in its archeological artifacts cultural remains of its parent species!

Furthermore, while Gilson had been certain that, as an essential principle of Western civilization and of what, in *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, he had called the "Western Creed," philosophy had transitioned from ancient Greek culture to Christian culture, clearly from what he says from his earliest to his latest writings he had never precisely understood what the ancient Greeks, including Aristotle, and St. Thomas had meant by a "species," nor precisely what is the nature of a real species in relation to a real genus. Such being the case, he could never have properly grasped precisely what Aristotle and St. Thomas had understood by the nature of philosophy, or of Christian philosophy, if it has one. And, such being the case, we can more precisely understand the great contribution Maurer's research makes to resolving the debate about the possible and actual existence and nature of philosophy and Christian philosophy, and many other issues as well.

Reconsidering Christian Philosophy's Nature in Light of the Preceding Observations

Following Maurer's research, if we reconsider philosophy and Christian philosophy chiefly to be habits of the human soul, several conclusions become immediately evident: 1) The terms "philosopher" and "philosophy" are predicated analogously. Since people of all genera of religious and non-religious affiliations habitually wonder about causes of organizational wholes, and organizational actions, the term "philosopher" and "philosophy" are, in some way, licitly applicable to pagans, religious individuals, and a multitude of people in between these, such as secular, non-religious, theists and non-theists (someone like the young Mortimer Adler, for instance). 2) Since philosophy is a cultural enterprise, and since historical records indicate that the ancient Greeks first started to wonder about the causes of organizational wholes as part of a prudential cultural enterprise, in a way, strictly speaking, the terms "philosopher" and "philosophy" would appear to be chiefly applicable to them and to those coming after them who have enough prudence to apply philosophical activity essentially the way the great ancient Greek philosophers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle had done. Referring to all other wonderers, strictly speaking, these terms would appear to be properly applicable analogously.

Nonetheless, the way the ancient Greeks had philosophized was essentially limited by their understanding of the universe considered as a genus (which was the generic formal object, external stimulus, of the psychological habit of ancient Greek philosophy, science). By nature, this universe was composed partly of an everlasting material (spheres of the heavens and the Earth) that had no temporal beginning in the past and no temporal end in the future. Within its deterministic spheres of the heavens existed a multitude of gods capable of the most morally praiseworthy and shameful acts.

These entities constantly traveled to Earth to interfere in human life and other earthly activities. Since these gods engaged in contradictory and, at times, morally shameful activities within the pre-philosophically-conceived ancient Greek universe, and since, within this mythopoietic universe, they were the proximate first principles of all specific and individual actions, from its start with Thales, by nature, the philosophical-cultural Greek enterprise of philosophizing consciously and explicitly sought no divine influence, no inspiration from the gods, nor from their inspired sons (the poets) on its specific and individual activity.

So conceived, this universe was an organizational whole comprised of everlasting specific parts, into which, strictly speaking, no new species, divine influence, inspiration, or providence could ever enter or exit. Since it was temporally everlasting by nature, the question of what caused this universe to exist or remain in existence (the question of the universe being created, or not created, *ex nihilo*) was eventually considered essentially unphilosophical, unscientific, a conceptual contradiction. And, since it was essentially uninspired and uninspirable by the gods (who were increasingly [especially by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle], philosophically, scientifically, reconceived to be uninterested in human affairs), the Christian notion of grace essentially entering into the ancient Greek philosophical and scientific universe was also philosophically and scientifically incoherent, an oxymoron.

Since all finite action in this universe was generated by specific individuals (individuals existing within species), the ancient Greek understanding of action essentially included no room for generic and specific progress. The Western idea of generic and specific novelty, progress in individual and organizational action (spontaneous generation of some specific and individual action that had never previously existed) was, in principle, essentially absent from it as a culturally prevailing and providential notion.

While such an idea might have been conceivable in principle and fact by someone (for example, by an atheist, or non-religious individual—someone like Aristotle), it never dominated to become an essential principle of the ancient Greek philosophical enterprise. Since their understanding of action was essentially flawed, so, too, was their understanding of conceptual and real, or behavioral, possibility and impossibility (contradiction and non-contradiction). Moreover, also flawed was the ancient Greek understanding of human freedom, which, chiefly as a freely-doable deed the ancient Greeks had never been able precisely to articulate (because they had not been able to adequately explain the nature of particular reason). Not even Aristotle had been able to fully give birth to the idea of an animal rationality proper to a free agent capable of exercising the philosophical, scientific, act of sense wonder. Thus considered, it is reasonable to claim that, from start to end, the ancient Greek conception of philosophy and science was essentially flawed, only partially birthed.

Since the conception of philosophy, science, was first adequately achieved in its nature by St. Thomas Aquinas (who claimed to be operating under the influence of divine grace and Christian theological cultural enterprise and teachings, including that about the immortality of the human soul in this life and the immortality of the human body in a heavenly afterlife), good reason exists to make two claims: 1) the proper genus of philosophical speculation is the Christian, not the ancient Greek, universe, and that the Christian philosophy, science, of St. Thomas gave birth to a concept of the human person from which the organizational psychology for generating philosophy, science, as a complete nature, or, at least, a more adequate notion of philosophy, science, than ancient Greek culture had been able to generate, could finally be realized; 2) if this understanding of philosophy, science, is the proper, or more adequate than the ancient Greek, one, then it is reasonable

to conclude that the proper way to predicate the terms “philosopher,” “philosophy,” “science,” “scientist,” is chiefly of the Christian philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas and analogously of the philosophical enterprise practiced by the ancient Greeks and others to whom it might be somewhat applicable.



Standing on the Shoulders of Giants to Refine Gilson’s Teaching about Christian Philosophy

SUMMARY

My chief aim in this article is to call upon the research of some exceptional scholars to make some refinements to Étienne Gilson’s teaching about the nature of Christian philosophy. In the process of so doing, I also aim to make as comprehensible as I can why Gilson, from 1931 through the rest of his academic life, had so much difficulty making intelligible to himself and to others precisely what he had meant by the term ‘Christian Philosophy.’

Keywords: philosophy, Christian philosophy, philosopher, psychology, organizational psychology, science, genus, species

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