

FR. JAN SOCHOŃ

**ÉTIENNE GILSON**  
**IN THE UNIVERSAL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF**  
**PHILOSOPHY** \*

Étienne Gilson was a historian of philosophy, medievalist, renewer of the scholastic tradition, proponent of a return to the original doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas, philosopher; born June 13, 1884 in Paris, died September 20, 1978 in Cravant near Auxerre (France).

Gilson was the co-founder and co-editor (with Gabriel Théry, O.P.) of a medievalist periodical: *Archives d'Histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire du Moyen-Âge*. He was a co-founder of the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies in Toronto, a lecturer in European and American universities, an author of university textbooks, a political activist, musician, expert on art and literature, writer, epistolographer, and a philosopher of language.

Gilson was brought up in a deeply religious atmosphere. He studied at the Minor Seminary of Notre-Dame-des-Champs, where he acquired a thorough knowledge of classical languages and became familiar with European culture (rhetoric, the works of Ovid, Vergil, Plautus, William Shakespeare, Dante Alighieri, Johann W. von Goethe, and Leo

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Tolstoy). He studied at the Sorbonne (where he attended the lectures of Victor Brochard, Gabriel Séailles, André Lalande, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Emile Durkheim, and Victor Delbos) and in the Collège de France under Henri Bergson. After completing his studies he taught philosophy in French lycees. In 1913 he defend a large doctoral thesis (*La doctrine cartésienne de la liberté et la théologie*) and a small one (*Index scolastico-cartésien*) written under Lévi-Bruhl's direction, and he began to lecture at the University of Lille. During the First World War he fought on the front, and after his military service he returned to Lille. In 1919 he became a professor at the University of Strasbourg. It was there that Gilson's interest in the philosophical tradition and thought of St. Thomas Aquinas was crystallized—thanks to Lucien Febvre's and Marc Bloch's support in medieval studies. Gilson devoted himself to the purpose of reintroducing the history of medieval thought to cultural consciousness and to university teaching. This was the result of his deep conviction that it was necessary to return to the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas, while leaving aside the “ideological” commentaries of John of St. Thomas and Cajetan.

In 1919 Gilson published his acclaimed book *Le thomisme. Introduction au système de saint Thomas d'Aquin*. The publication of his research results made Gilson famous not only among experts in medieval culture. He moved to Paris where he was given the Chair of the History of Medieval Philosophy at the Sorbonne. Moreover, Gilson became a professor at the École des Hautes Études, took part in international philosophical congresses, and taught in many European schools.

His publications on the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas and other medieval thinkers—including monographs devoted to Bonaventure (*La philosophie de saint Bonaventure*)<sup>1</sup> and Duns Scotus (*Pourquoi saint*

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<sup>1</sup> Paris: Vrin, 1924. In English: *The Philosophy of St. Bonaventure*, trans. by Dom Iltyd Trethowan and Frank J. Sheed (Paterson, N.J.: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1965).

*Thomas a critiqué saint Augustin. Suivi de Avicenne et le point de départ de Duns Scot,*<sup>2</sup> and *Jean Duns Scot: Introduction à ses positions fondamentales*<sup>3</sup>)—led to numerous scholarly controversies. Gilson's opposition to the increasing departure from Christianity in Western societies resulted in violent attacks against him. Some "polemicists" went as far as to state that Thomas Aquinas had done more evil to the Church than did Martin Luther. Opinions of that sort were directed against metaphysical realism, that is, against the recognition of the sphere of natural wisdom in man. Gilson—fascinated by the possibility of contact with the real (non-fictional) world, while retaining respect for the world's mystery and admiration for man's intellect—opposed such opinions in the strongest possible terms, which did not win him many friends. The bitter attacks on his views and person made him leave for North America. He lectured at Harvard University, wrote scholarly papers, and examined the possibility of establishing an institute for medieval studies. In 1929 his dream became a reality: the operation of the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies in Toronto was launched.<sup>4</sup> As its co-founder and director of studies, Gilson began to propagate the ideas that were born in the Institute, while lecturing in Europe and North America. Thereby the school quickly became one of the most important centres of Thomistic studies.

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<sup>2</sup> *Archives d'Histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire du Moyen Âge* 1 (1926–1927): 5–128.

<sup>3</sup> Paris: Vrin, 1952.

<sup>4</sup> "The *Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies* in Toronto was established in 1929 under the auspice of St. Michael's College, Toronto, and a Roman Catholic religious order, the Congregation of the Priests of St. Basil, with the aim of furthering research on the Middle Ages and, secondarily, to offer graduate academic programmes for a limited number of students. Ten years later Rome granted it pontifical status and a charter empowering it to confer the pontifical Licentiate in Medieval Studies (M.S.L.) and Doctorate in Medieval Studies (M.S.D.)." Harold Remus, William Closson James, Daniel Fraikin, *Religious Studies in Ontario: A State-of-the-Art Review* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992), 80.

During the Second World War, Gilson lived and did research in France, then occupied by the Germans. In 1945 he took part in the conference in the matter of the UN Charter in San Francisco, and the founding conference of UNESCO in London. In 1947–1948 he was elected as Conseiller de la République by the National Assembly of France. He showed a firmly anti-communist attitude, an adherence to Christian values, a devotion to traditional liturgy, and an engagement in the works of the Church. He was opposed to the increasing desacralisation of religion, the blurring of the difference between the clergy and lay people, and the falsification of the history of the Church. When Jean Guittou published an article in *Le Figaro*, in which he publicly supported the position of Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae* concerning, among other things, the ban on artificial contraception, Gilson did likewise, although the papal document was badly received in many circles—some theologians even denied its canonical value, arguing that it did not have general acceptance or universal consent.

In 1950 Gilson's book *L'être et l'essence* was criticized as suggesting that metaphysical truths could change; attempts were even made to place it on the Index of Forbidden Books. For this reason Gilson came forward to defend his own position and that of his friends—Henri de Lubac and Marie-Dominique Chenu. He was accused of not being open to the signs of the present time, of conservatism, anti-Americanism, and of being insensitive to the growing phenomena of religious indifference and atheism. He was not understood by those who were overly inclined to philosophical and theological innovations. The attacks he was subjected to could be reduced to the assertion—in the words of Fernand Van Steenberghen—that “the epoch of Gilson has already ended.” Depressed by the death of his wife and incessant attacks on his work, Gilson limited his public activity. He left Paris and moved to Cravant (the Yonne department), where he died at the age of 94 years.

On Gilson's ninetieth birthday, Pope Paul VI sent a letter written in his own handwriting to him as an expression of the regard of the entire Church. The Pope wrote that with his works Gilson had revived the source of wisdom from which industrial society fascinated by what it "has," but often completed blind to the meaning of "to be" and to its metaphysical roots, would derive great benefit. In France, however, the letter found no echo.

Gilson wrote over 60 books and 800 academic treatises, articles, and journalistic statements. He received over a dozen doctorates *honoris causa* (e.g., from the universities of Harvard, Oxford, and Bologna).

Gilson's most important works are as follows: *Index scolastico-cartésien* (New York 1912), *La liberté chez Descartes et la théologie* (Paris 1913), *Le thomisme. Introduction au système de saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Strasbourg 1919),<sup>5</sup> *Introduction à l'étude de saint Augustin* (Paris 1929),<sup>6</sup> *L'esprit de la philosophie médiévale* (Vol. 1–2, Paris 1932),<sup>7</sup> *Christianisme et philosophie* (Paris 1936), *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York 1937), *Héloïse et Abélard* (Paris 1938),<sup>8</sup> *Dante et la philosophie* (Paris 1939),<sup>9</sup> *Réalisme thomiste et critique de la connaissance* (Paris 1939),<sup>10</sup> *God and Philosophy* (New York 1941), *L'être et l'essence* (Paris 1948), *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto 1949), *Les métamorphoses de la cité de Dieu* (Louvain

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<sup>5</sup> *Thomism: The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Laurence K. Shook and Armand Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, trans. L. E. M. Lynch (New York: Random House, 1960).

<sup>7</sup> *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, trans. A. H. C. Downes (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936).

<sup>8</sup> *Heloise and Abelard*, trans. L. K. Shook (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1965).

<sup>9</sup> *Dante and Philosophy*, trans. David Moore (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

<sup>10</sup> *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*, trans. Mark A. Wauck (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012).

1952), *De la Bible à François Villon: Rabelais franciscain*,<sup>11</sup> *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York 1955), *Peinture et réalité* (Paris 1958),<sup>12</sup> *Elements of Christian Philosophy* (Garden City 1960), *Le philosophe et la théologie* (Paris 1960),<sup>13</sup> *Introduction aux art du beau* (Paris 1963), *Matières et formes: Poétiques particulières des arts majeurs* (Paris 1964),<sup>14</sup> *La société de masse et sa culture* (Paris 1967), *Les tribulations de Sophie* (Paris 1967), *Linguistique et philosophie: Essai sur les constants philosophiques du langage* (Paris 1969),<sup>15</sup> *Dante et Béatrice: Études dantesques* (Paris 1974), *L'athéisme difficile* (Paris 1979), *Constantes philosophiques de l'être* (Paris 1983). In English translations also: *Three Quests in Philosophy*, ed. Armand Maurer (Toronto 2008), and *Medieval Essays*, trans. James G. Colbert (Eugene 2011).

### The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy

Although he began his education in church schools, Gilson did not encounter a philosophy that could satisfy his expectations. The Sorbonne also taught that scholasticism was a philosophy not worthy learning, because in its history it did not go beyond the framework of a misunderstood Aristotelianism; furthermore, René Descartes had refuted it in an evident way. On the other hand, his research on Cartesianism made Gilson aware of the forgotten treasure of medieval thought, especially the thought of Thomas Aquinas. He arrived at the conviction that

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<sup>11</sup> In Étienne Gilson, *Les idées et les lettres* (Paris: Vrin, 1932).

<sup>12</sup> *Painting and Reality* (New York: Pantheon Books 1957).

<sup>13</sup> *The Philosopher and Theology*, trans. Cécile Gilson (New York: Random House, 1962).

<sup>14</sup> *Forms and Substances in the Arts*, trans. Salvator Attanasio (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966).

<sup>15</sup> *Linguistics and Philosophy: An Essay on the Philosophical Constants of Language*, trans. John Lyon (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

it cannot be asserted that Descartes's propositions had grown directly from the tradition of ancient philosophy, or that the period of the Middle Ages was a "dark night" in Europe's intellectual history. He tried to better understand that unusual epoch and to describe the spirit of medieval philosophy, which was a spirit of Christian philosophy.

Gilson was convinced that the achievements of medieval philosophical and theological culture were still a living source, and that it was worthwhile to look to it—therefore, he analysed Aquinas's original texts. Almost everything he wrote<sup>16</sup> expressed his opposition both to the so-called philosophical endemism, which had been firmly entrenched in scholasticism since the thirteenth century, and to the views of Yves Congar, Henri de Lubac, and Anton C. Pegis. Although surrounded by an atmosphere unfavourable to realism, he did not become discouraged. He was aware that he was living in times when the *cogito* triumphed over *I create* and provided grounds for an increase in all forms of religious indifference and atheism.

### **The Problem of the History of Philosophy**

According to Gilson, the history of philosophy as an academic discipline should have a philosophical character. At the International Philosophical Congress at Harvard University (October 15, 1926), while considering the role of philosophy in the history of civilization, he said that the history of philosophy is marked by philosophy; philosophy as the love of wisdom must seek the truth, since without truth there is no wisdom. The history of philosophy in no way can be separated from its historical dimension and development. It must be approached teleologically—always started with research on source material, which is and must always be regarded as the most important ele-

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<sup>16</sup> I especially mean here the fourth edition of *Le thomisme* (1942) and, perhaps Gilson's most important work, *L'esprit de la philosophie médiévale*.

ment. Then, the central positions of an epoch must be identified—as that taken by the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century. Particular questions posed by particular philosophers are less important—rather, philosophical problems and ideas should be treated as more relevant. It should also be recognized that metaphysics is the heart of philosophy as such, and the questions of metaphysics—despite the development of science—remain unchanged over the ages. Hence, the history of European classical philosophy is a history of metaphysics, and the core of metaphysics is found in the conceptions of Plato and Aristotle, and later in the anthropology and theory of being of St. Thomas Aquinas. The concept of being is what determines the type of metaphysics connected with a particular philosophy. Philosophical ideas should be shown in their historical and cultural context, without overlooking the personal situation in which a particular thinker worked. It is not possible, for example, to understand medieval philosophical thought without taking under consideration the role of the school system of the time, of the Church, theology, politics, or the important scientific achievements of Greek, Arab, and Jewish thinkers.

With these assertions Gilson consistently disproved the conventional belief (held by Victor Cousin, Octave Hamelin, etc.) that there are sharp boundaries between particular periods of history, especially those of the history of culture and of philosophy. He also refuted other deeply rooted, popular beliefs about the “dark Middle Ages focused on penance” and the “atheistic Renaissance,” as representing the embarrassing archives of an old methodology.

Gilson’s work shows the importance of two terminological categories that build the foundations of his interpretation of the history of philosophy: “Christian philosophy,” and “medieval philosophy.” The first of them is controversial. Some scholars agree to use it, but only conditionally. Others see in it an empty term: there is no Christian philosophy, just as there is no Christian physics, astronomy or any other

science (Émile Bréhier—the concept of “Christian philosophy” is contradictory). Gilson, however, asserted that without using the category of “Christian philosophy,” we cannot make a fair, historical and philosophical synthesis.

When describing the development of Greek philosophy, Gilson emphasizes its orientation toward religion, its special longing for contact with the deity; such an approach automatically directs attention to the connections between philosophy and religion, to the fundamental fact that early Christianity had contact with cultures of Alexandria, Rome, Antioch—with all the cultures that were in preparation for evangelization. The discernment of this fact makes Gilson aware of the need to use the term “Christian philosophy” to designate philosophy cultivated by persons who regard themselves as Christians. For doing philosophy with an awareness of affiliation with Christianity is not without influence on the shape of philosophical achievements.

Only a realistic philosophy of being is regarded by Gilson as valuable. The value of such a philosophy increases in proportion to its realism. Philosophy properly understood does not seek to impose our subjective categories on things, or to satisfy our imagination; it strives to reach objective reality, to interpret it, to meditate on the miraculous character of existence which, precisely as existence, opens man to mysteries conceived in a religious way—this is the fundamental understanding of philosophy and its purpose as Gilson presents it.

The realistic philosophical attitude is necessary for the full development of humanity, and thereby for the development of the Christian life in man. It is all the more essential since, as Gilson showed, contemporary Western culture is inundated with subjectivism and philosophical idealism, which neglect concrete being in favour of what is produced by thought, created by man, possible, and at the same time linguistically expressible. As a consequence of this conviction, Gilson uses the term “medieval philosophy” to designate the medieval combi-

nation of faith and reason, and the rational justification of the thesis that the texts of great scholasticism basically had a theological character. Since the phenomenon of medieval philosophy is a historical fact, then, for example, the legacy of neo-Platonism or that of Pseudo-Dionysius need to be looked at in a different way.

In the article entitled “L’idée de philosophie chez saint Augustin et chez saint Thomas d’Aquin,”<sup>17</sup> Gilson stated emphatically that both Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas were basically theologians, which means that they recognized the primacy of faith. Aquinas ascribed the same role and dignity to faith as did Augustine. Faith contains the plenitude of knowledge that leads to salvation, which means that one who is satisfied with faith alone is already receiving in it the plenitude of all the goods that should be the object of his hope. Unlike philosophy, faith carries a message for all people, the learned and the simple—salvation has been offered to all mankind. The philosopher, on the other hand, can find something in faith especially for himself and benefit from it. Regardless of his intellectual abilities, he remains only a man. The task of gathering into one system all the truths which are necessary for salvation and accessible to the human mind (without polluting them with even the smallest errors, which would consequently destroy the truth) is not impossible, but in practice is exceeds the ability of any man left to his own devices. Even supposing that someone were able to succeed in this task, he would only complete it very late, after dedicating his whole life to it. And yet, we need to know the truth right away, so that we may conform our life to its indications as quickly as possible.

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<sup>17</sup> *La Vie Intellectuelle* 3, no. 8 (1930): 46–62; in English: “The Idea of Philosophy in St. Augustine and in St. Thomas Aquinas,” in *A Gilson Reader: Selected Writings of Etienne Gilson*, ed. Anton C. Pegis (Garden City, NY: Hanover House, 1957), 68–81.

## Existential Thomism

It is impossible to engage in the history of philosophy without showing one's own vision of philosophy. For Gilson, the history of philosophy became a tool to help him create his own philosophical reflection, which was realistic and directed to the contemplation of reality. Although he was said to be a Thomist without being a Thomist, Gilson created, together with Jacques Maritain, a new version of Thomism, called "existential Thomism." In 1945 he introduced the concept of the "existential boundary of philosophy" to his reflections—the concept which did not imply any connection with existentialism, but applied only to Thomism.<sup>18</sup>

In the 1930s Gilson, like Maritain, discovered and appreciated the role of existence in Thomas's conception of being. *Esse* is what is most deep (it is hard to rid ourselves of spatial descriptions), most hidden (*magis intimum*) in being; it is something that cannot be apprehended in concepts, but is what connects real reality with the pure Being. It is the common property that beings have in virtue of their act of existence. But "forgetting about existence" and directing attention exclusively to the order of content (essence) will still remain a great temptation for philosophy and philosophers. Therefore, the only way to hold to the truth of philosophical reflection (i.e., to avoid isolation from existence) is to establish existence as a boundary of philosophy—a boundary which in a certain sense would possess a common essence with philosophy ("coessentielle"), and which philosophy would have to include in the definition of its object. In this way the category of existence became a call sign for existential Thomism. Thanks to existence, we move about in the real world, not a realm of manifestations, relations, or dreams. We cannot forget about existence if we intend to phi-

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<sup>18</sup> See Étienne Gilson, "Limites existentielles de la philosophie," in *L'Existence* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 69–87.

losophize within the context of the world that is real. "Forgetting about existence" means a passage to the order of speculative thought of the Hegelian type, or to arbitrary assumptions of historical existentialism which identifies existence with "being in the world." Remaining within the boundaries established by existence guarantees cognitive realism, in which the highest act of cognition is the judgment, and not the concept. The outcomes of essentialisms and existentialisms are based on the category of "experiencing" someone else and, consequently, the identification of existence with the experience of the absurd, terror, nothingness, or reification. Existence thus understood cannot lead to the truth.

The existential reading of Thomas's thought brings wisdom which leads directly to the recognition of the personal God and the acceptance of a religious way of life. When we distinguish between the order of philosophy and that of theology, we must recognize the influence of Christian revelation on the philosophical attitude of a Christian. The fact that we attempt to philosophize as Christians is not without significance: it constantly requires us to take efforts. The task of philosophical reflection consists in a wisdom-based contemplation of reality, a contemplation that brings us closer to the truth and the affirmation of God. The category of truth is independent: neither society nor the creative abilities of philosophers can erase the objectivity (independence from the human factor) of truth. Therefore, Gilson strongly defended the thesis that honest philosophical reflection does not stop with itself, but directs itself toward theology that "operates" in the realm of revealed contents by rationally approaching what God says to man. The experience of faith is not a fideistic experience; it has rational grounds. While it is true that religious faith puts man in relation to a mystery, the mystery does not mean absolute unknowability, but rather it makes the man who knows aware of his cognitive openness. The existence of the mystery precludes the presence of contradiction. It is man's reason that

causes that he accepts mystery to rid himself of the burdensome feeling of the absurd.

### **Discussions with Atheism**

Gilson lived and worked in an epoch that could hardly be called religiously courageous. Even if the atheistic attitude was not dominant in it, more and more people became religiously indifferent, as they believed that the concept of God explains nothing and even multiplies intellectual difficulties. Therefore, they preferred to live as if there were no God. In the 1930s, philosophical centers in France entered into a discussion on atheism, which was becoming a social problem as it influenced everything that man “cultivated,” that is, culture in a broad sense. Beginning with René Descartes (although he himself interpreted the subjective world from positions that excluded the possibility of God’s non-existence) whose thought, historically speaking, became one of the main sources of contemporary atheism, through Immanuel Kant, David Hume, Auguste Comte, and their successors who referred to positivist, scientist, and neo-positivist models of doing philosophy, to the scientific gnosis of the present, theodicy was not so much expressly negated as tacitly eliminated from the sphere of man’s cognitive interests. God was accepted—but only marginally—in moral, aesthetic, or political orders. Philosophers, who referred to Hegel’s conceptual-logical thought, effectively transformed the transcendent Absolute into some forms of divinity (often conceived in a strange way). The history of philosophy is also familiar with the attempts of showing that God is nothing but a product of man’s imagination. According to Gilson, whatever philosophers’ motivations are—be it to appreciate man, preserve the unity and coherence of a system, or create a revolutionary and economic utopia—they always lead to a confrontation with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and do not result from metaphysical lines

of reasoning. Seeing the signs of atheistic imagination, the attitudes marked by libertinism or paganism, and those intolerantly demanding respect for tolerance or striving not only to theoretically eliminate faith in God, but to destroy the Church and the Jewish nation (Karl Marx), Gilson tried to capture the essence of these phenomena. When he discovered the authentic philosophy of St. Thomas, he made an attempt to appraise the value of contemporary atheism in the light of Aquinas's views. He not only discussed the matter with specialists, but—because atheism was spreading wider and wider—also engaged in a “journalistic battle.” In the weekly periodical *Sept* and other more specialized periodicals, he published a series of articles discussing various aspects of culture influenced by atheism; he gave radio talks and lectures about how authentic Christian thought was distorted. He persuaded his opponents to accept the following assertion: philosophers cannot close the case of God before it is opened. His active involvement in discussion on atheism bore fruit in the form of the book *L'athéisme difficile* in which he posed the questions: How is atheism possible in light of man's natural wisdom and metaphysical realism? Does an appeal to Thomas Aquinas's metaphysics justify the conviction that atheism as a philosophical position does not exist, and even cannot exist?

Gilson could formulate the problem in this way, because he accepted a fundamental fact, namely, that atheism in its various forms, together with secularism and paganism, is secondary in relation to the affirmation of God. Man's first natural attitude is to believe in God's existence. For man must first presuppose some idea of God in order to deny it. There are, of course, some basic questions to be answered here: What is the basis for the affirmation of God? How can we explain the fact that God is constantly present in human thought and culture? Where does the extraordinary constancy of thinking about God come from?

Gilson expressed the belief that we acquire elementary knowledge of God in spontaneous contact with real reality. Thus, the philosophical problem of God's existence (of the negation of God's existence too) appears in the context of, and is conditioned by, a spontaneous contact with the world. The natural affirmation of reality shows that man desires to prolong his existence beyond the material dimension; and this is equally true when he experiences both the fragility of his own existence and the joy of the fullness of life. In his every act, man spontaneously sees his insufficiency—he has the feeling of possessing existence, but not of being existence. At the level of the spontaneous encounter with reality, man does not think of any principles of cognition, but only notices that he knows “something” that is independent of him. It is an affirmation which is prior to human self-knowledge. This spontaneous reading of reality, while it is not yet philosophy, is the place where man's natural religious dispositions come out. They are undoubted, because they express the religiosity that belongs to the human mind by virtue of its nature. Before man arrives at a positive or negative belief about God's existence, he first becomes aware of the fact that some intuition about the existence of God, or at least about the real possibility of God's existence, grows in him. Prior to religious faith, then, and prior to philosophical knowledge, there is another kind of knowledge of God—natural knowledge acquired in a spontaneous way.

Atheism, thus, as a conception that negates any kind of absolute or divinity, essentially does not appear in the framework of man's spontaneous encounter with reality, but only as a result of a philosophical analysis of the contingency of human rootedness in reality. When we try to transform the spontaneously acquired concept of God into rationally justified knowledge, we enter the terrain of philosophy. Since he understands that our vision of being determines how we understand God, Gilson appeals to Thomas Aquinas who presented the problem of

God in the light of the metaphysical approach to being. Hence, the cognition of God which occurs in the framework of metaphysics both provides an answer to the essential question: “Why does something rather than nothing exist?” and shows that composite and changing beings that possess transcendental properties (truth, good, beauty) require the existence of the personal Absolute, namely God, as their efficient, exemplar, and final cause.

Atheism has taken different forms over the course of history; Gilson enumerates the following: scientific atheism, proletarian atheism, the atheism of distraction and indifference, practical atheism, philosophical atheism, as well as freethinking, secularism, and paganism; according to him, all these forms of atheism do not use philosophical arguments; neither in the past nor in the present do they find rational justification in reality, because they are based on arbitrarily accepted assumptions and a complete misunderstanding of the fact of religiosity and the essence of religion, especially in its ontic dimension. Nevertheless, philosophical atheism concerns the ontic order, and thus it accepts a certain idea of God.

The culmination of Gilson’s thoughts on atheism is the assertion that philosophical atheism does not exist, and basically it is not possible at all. The non-existence of God, to be sure, is the main question. For the supporters of atheism, the indestructibility and permanence of the belief about God’s existence is one of the most difficult intellectual obstacles to overcome. What is binding in philosophy, as Gilson underscores, includes the laws of reality (which are independent of man’s cognition and volition), the natural abilities of the human person (who is endowed with intellect and will), and the nature of real reality (which requires ultimate reasons for its existence). Therefore, the question of God is properly posed by metaphysics, but only those who accept metaphysics understand it. From the metaphysical perspective, then, philosophical atheism appears as a secondary product of philosophical

thought—the thought that erred in explaining reality or in understanding human cognition. Among the various forms of atheism, Gilson also considers that which proclaims “God’s death;” according to him, it is a consequence of a universal crisis of values, a crisis in understanding being, and a departure from the metaphysical apprehension of reality.

Realistic philosophy, focused on knowing reality, brings wisdom which leads to the recognition of God’s existence and the acceptance of a religious way of life. Of course, this kind of philosophy cannot annul—and essentially does not annul—the free act of man’s decision. Every man is free in his own measure. Man’s freedom appears in the form of his free choices. But in order for man to understand and properly use his individual freedom, he needs to be introduced to Christian culture (or, in a narrow sense, to Christian civilization and history), that is, to such a culture whose “everydayness” is permeated by God’s forgiveness and mercy. According to Gilson, the development of Christian culture is a unique opportunity for Europe to get out of its cultural crisis.

### **Thoughts on Literature and Art**

The questions of art, aesthetic experience, and the connections between religion and literature, although not too popular in philosophical circles, were an important area to which Gilson devoted much attention.<sup>19</sup> In order to consider the problems of aesthetics (a distinct discipline since Hegel’s times), he applied the same methods as those developed for the metaphysical explanation of the world. He started from the assumption that to understand how works of art exist we must learn both to make distinctions between them and to grasp properly what makes an artefact a work of art. Applying the method of exclusion, he

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<sup>19</sup> These questions were also of great interest to other neo-Thomists of the time, especially Maritain and de Wulf.

came to the conclusion that neither action, cognition, expression, symbolization, intuition, nor moral position can belong to the order of art as such, although all of them are traceable in various manifestations of creative activity. Art can be defined as a form of production (*la factivité*) supported by both an intellectual virtue that operates within the knowledge of definite rules of artistic action and a gift of grace (mysterious, if not irrational) that encourages internal dispositions to perform creative acts.

Beauty is the main aim of the artist's activity. The artist works for the sake of "transcendent uselessness." The work of art is connected with philosophy; Gilson accentuates this connection in his commentaries on the *Divine Comedy*. According to him, the *Comedy* reflects the main philosophical tendencies of the epoch, especially questions connected with political and social justice. Dante Alighieri wanted to express not so much his metaphysical views as his moral views; his poetic trilogy (*Vita nuova, Convivio, La Divina Comedia*) is in this respect an exemplary artistic achievement.

## Conclusion

Gilson's studies lead to the following conclusions: God exists, truth exists, love and the gift of the sacred sacraments exist. There is also classical philosophy—while it is true that it does not provide complete solutions, it makes it possible to find a way out of contradictory explanations of the world, and enables us, while remaining in the depth of mystery, to reconcile our doubts with real reality—or, speaking more precisely, to retrieve that reality. It also allows us to live in openness to the voice of Revelation that constantly flows from reality.



**ÉTIENNE GILSON  
IN THE UNIVERSAL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PHILOSOPHY**

SUMMARY

The article aims at presenting the life and work of Étienne Gilson (1884–1978)—a historian of philosophy, medievalist, renewer of the scholastic tradition, proponent of a return to the original doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas, and philosopher. It is focused on selected areas of Gilson’s philosophical interest, such as: medieval philosophy, the history of philosophy, existential Thomism, atheism, literature and art. In the final analysis, Gilson appears as a firm advocate of philosophical realism which makes it possible to find a way out of contradictory explanations of the world, and allows man to live in openness to the voice of God’s revelation that constantly flows from reality.

KEYWORDS

Étienne Gilson, Thomas Aquinas, medieval philosophy, existential Thomism, atheism, literature, art, Christian philosophy, metaphysics, realism, *Universal Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

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