In the Light of Reason

Father Michael T. Ryan
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A Brief Introduction to
St. Thomas Aquinas

Fr. Michael T. Ryan
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INTRODUCTION

Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth, and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know Himself—so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves.

Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, opening lines

A great many years ago, I met a lady who had a fine set of dishes. Every spring she would take them out and clean them thoroughly. Then she would carefully wrap them and store them again for another year. That always seemed to me to be a perfect example of turning something that was designed to be a means into an end. This is a constant temptation for an age that has fallen in love with BlackBerries, iPads, and the Internet, and that appears to pay much more attention to techniques than to goals. It is also a danger for so many people today who are highly trained in some narrow discipline, but who rarely relate their daily occupations to the great questions of life such as, Where have I come from and where am I going? What is there after this life? What, in fact, is the point of life? This kind of practical atheism is usually reflected in the lack of any overall view of reality. It highlights the need for carrying out systematic philosophical reflection.

One of the many things we need to be thankful for as Catholics is that we belong to a Church that is deeply aware of the central role played in human life by good philosophy. One of the great minds of modern times, Cardinal Newman, now Blessed John Henry Newman, insisted that philosophy had to permeate every subject taught in a university (something that sadly is not the case in most universities today). Pope Leo XIII in his 1879 encyclical *Aeterni Patris* spoke eloquently of the absolute necessity of turning to the philosophical thought of St. Thomas Aquinas.

More recently, Pope John Paul II in his 1998 encyclical *Fides et Ratio* stated: “I wish to repeat clearly that the study of philosophy is fundamental and indispensable to the structure of theological studies and to the formation of candidates for the priesthood” (no. 62).

We do not have to look far to find the reasons for this critical role of philosophy. Consider the following:

“A complete adherence by man to divine revelation cannot be conceived as an act of blind faith, a fideism lacking rational motivation. The act of faith presupposes of its nature ‘the reasons for believing,’ the ‘motives of credibility,’
which are in great measure philosophical” (Sacred Congregation for Christian Education, January 20, 1972).

“The intellectual air of any day is full of philosophical doctrines … No theologian can be free of this, so that, in self-defense, he must himself become a philosopher in order to be able to use philosophy critically” (Frederick Sontag, Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association, 1970, p. 90).

Then there are these words from a famous 20th-century Protestant theologian: “On every page of every religious or theological text these concepts appear: time, space, cause, thing, subject, nature, movement, freedom, necessity, life, value, knowledge, experience, being, and non-being. Biblicism may try to preserve their popular meaning, but then it ceases to be theology … The theologian must take seriously the meaning of the terms he uses. They must be known to him in the whole depth and breadth of their meaning. Therefore the systematic theologian must be a philosopher in critical understanding even if not in creative power” (Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology, Vol. 1, pp. 24–25).

In Fides et Ratio, Pope John Paul II pointed out several reasons why the study of philosophy is so important for everyone and absolutely necessary for the student of theology. First: “Theologians, through lack of philosophical competence, allow themselves to be swayed uncritically by assertions which have become part of current parlance and culture but which are poorly grounded in reason.” Second: “There are also signs of a resurgence of fideism, which fails to recognize the importance of rational knowledge and philosophical discourse for the understanding of faith, indeed for the very possibility of belief in God. One currently widespread symptom of this fideistic tendency is a ‘biblicism’ which tends to make the reading and exegesis of Sacred Scripture the sole criterion of truth …” (no. 55). Third: “Another thrust to be reckoned with is scientism. This is the philosophical notion which refuses to admit the validity of forms of knowledge other than those of the positive sciences …” (no. 88).

For all these reasons, I have put together this collection of short reflections on a number of key areas in philosophy. They are rooted in philosophy courses that I taught over a period of thirty-one years. I am publishing them first of all in the hope that some of my former students may find them helpful in reviewing their own philosophical training. However, I also hope that others, whether they have had the opportunity to do a formal study of philosophy or not, may find in them a stimulus to worthwhile reflection and see them also as an aid to their own Catholic faith.

Most of these short chapters reflect the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas, and of Aristotle, who informed so much of St. Thomas’s thinking. I am not suggesting that St. Thomas has all the answers. In fact, Fides et Ratio states that we must also look to the good philosophical work of other Catholic thinkers. Pope John Paul II, himself a published philosopher, was an excellent
example of that. In our own time, we can find helpful reflections in the existentialist philosophy of Gabriel Marcel. There are also the phenomenological studies of several Catholic students of Edmund Husserl, such as Dietrich Von Hildebrand and especially St. Edith Stein. We can be helped also by the philosophical work of several Catholic students of Ludwig Wittgenstein who are in the tradition of Analytic Philosophy, notably Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Geach, and, in the same general tradition, Mary Geach, Michael Dummett, and John Haldane. We must be thankful as well for the leading role in virtue ethics provided by Alasdair MacIntyre. Here in Canada, we are fortunate to have a Catholic philosopher, Charles Taylor, who is generally ranked among the top four or five philosophical minds of our day. This is only a sampling of the richness available to us.

As MacIntyre points out in his 2009 book, *God, Philosophy, Universities*, an account faithful to the Catholic philosophical tradition will still be “a Thomistic account in its overall understanding of truth and of our relationship to God as both first and final cause.” However, it will also need to consider many of the present-day issues in philosophy and look to the work of a variety of Catholic thinkers (178).

In his widely misunderstood Regensburg address, Pope Benedict XVI spoke of the need for “faith and reason coming together in a new way.” He went on to say, “The courage to engage the whole breadth of reason, and not the denial of its grandeur—this is the program with which a theology grounded in biblical faith enters into the debates of our time.”

Fifty years ago, I had the great privilege of studying philosophy under the guidance of some of the best Catholic philosophical minds of the day, all of them people with deep Catholic faith and a profound love of truth. I am humbled at the realization of what a grace this was in my life. I am very conscious of the inadequacy of the brief presentations in this book. However, I hope they will at least encourage many to turn to far better thinkers, to nourish themselves at the rich table of the Catholic philosophical tradition, and especially to grow in their appreciation of the wisdom of St. Thomas Aquinas.

**Prayer of St. Thomas Aquinas before Study**

_Bestow upon me, O God, an understanding that knows you, wisdom in finding you, a way of life that is pleasing to you, perseverance that faithfully waits for you, and confidence that I shall embrace you at the last. Amen._
The Need for a Philosophy of Nature

A recent newspaper article described the visit of Canadian astronaut Chris Hadfield to a Toronto Catholic high school. We can imagine the excitement such a visit generates. Here is a highly trained scientist who has actually spent time flying through the heavens in one of the most sophisticated machines humans have ever devised. Space is one of the new frontiers in our search for knowledge. Science, we are told, is our guide in that search. We are rightly in awe of what modern science and technology have accomplished. We can also see a practical value in the social sciences. Compared to the physical sciences, and for that matter the social sciences, philosophy and even theology can seem quite irrelevant to daily life.

The General Study of Nature

Aristotle (384–322 BCE), a great philosopher and also one of the most famous biologists of all time, thought differently. For him, a philosophy of nature, or what he regarded as the general study of nature, was essential and needed to be undertaken before we turned to what is today called science, but what he called the particular studies of nature. This was also the conviction embodied in the great medieval universities and embraced by St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). What made these centres of learning be “universities” was the fact that they saw the general study or philosophy of nature and society as giving a unity to the other disciplines, a unity that found its highest expression in theology.

The general study of nature or the philosophy of nature has a foundational role especially for two reasons.
First, each of the particular sciences uses a number of important general terms without critically examining what such terms actually mean. These are terms such as matter, nature, motion, change, chance, time, infinity, and space. We cannot do science without them. Since all the sciences use such terms, it is vital that there be a field of study that first establishes with care what each term means. That field of study is philosophy, or the general study of nature.

Second, our more general knowledge, and the terms it uses, while vague are nonetheless more certain for us. For example, I may not be able to say very clearly what “life” is, but I am certain there is a real distinction between the living and the non-living. Any particular scientists whose study of the building blocks of life led them to deny this basic distinction—and some have done so—would clearly have gone off track. The 20th-century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein uses another example. He speaks of scientists who try to tell us that the wooden floor on which we stand is not really solid because it is composed of tiny atomic particles whirling about in what is largely empty space. Something, he says, has gone amiss here, for it is the job of the scientist to explain what makes the floor solid, not to deny that it is solid—something of which we are all quite certain.

The reason why our knowledge of these more general terms is so certain is that we, in our knowing process, go from knowing in potency (that is, having the capacity to know) to knowing in act (that is, actually knowing something). In this process, we know the more potential or general first, and better than we know the more actual (and therefore particular). A sign of this is that we tend to explain the more particular in terms of the more general. We explain to a child what a camel is by stating that it is a kind of animal. Again, we might find ourselves looking at a growth in our garden and saying, “I’m not sure what it is, but it is certainly a plant.”

When 16th- and 17th-century scientists rejected much of Aristotle’s science (his more particular studies of nature), they also abandoned his philosophy of nature (his general study of nature), thus assuming that the general terms used by all the sciences, and critically examined by the philosophy of nature, posed no special problems of interpretation. Developments in the past hundred years have shown that “this assumption is definitely erroneous” (Ivor Leclerc, *The Nature of Physical Existence*, London 1972, p. 351). “Every important physical theory presupposes a cluster of philosophical concepts regarding space, time, motion, causality, and so forth, which are a consequence of the philosophical world view of the pioneers of physics” (Antonio Moreno, O.P., “The Law of Inertia and the Principle ‘Quidquid movetur ab alio movetur,’” *The Thomist*, Vol. 38, 1974, p. 306).

The neglect of the philosophy of nature has, for example, frequently led to a spirit of reductionism that sees physical reality (including humans) as being “nothing but” what the natural sciences discover, so that Peter or Susan, for
example, is finally nothing more than a particular arrangement of subatomic particles.

Hence, the importance of philosophy, that is, of a general study of nature that provides us with a number of propositions that, though general, are very certain and must remain as guides when we enter into the more detailed scientific study of our world. What philosophy has to say about such terms as nature, motion, space, and infinity is crucial to a correct understanding of our world.

In his 2009 study, God, Philosophy, Universities, Catholic philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre looks at the more far-reaching effects of abandoning the foundational role of philosophy. There he remarks that the modern university has taken a direction that leads to “the fragmentation of knowledge and understanding, toward a multiplicity of enquiries accompanied by no sense of any underlying unity,” and has become a place that no longer recognizes as a central task of philosophy the portrayal of “the relationship between a theological understanding of the world and the kinds of understanding provided by the various secular disciplines” (135).

A Natural Language as Our Resource in Philosophy

The resources we need in order to do philosophy are very different from those required to do the particular sciences. When Galileo Galilei (1564–1642), one of the founders of modern science, undertook his study of nature, he made use of the best telescope he could put his hands on. The particular sciences, like astronomy, biology, botany, chemistry, geology, physics, and zoology require such aids as telescopes, microscopes, and, of course, field trips in order to study some aspect of nature. In contrast to this, all that philosophy requires is the ability to speak and understand a natural language, such as English. What we are after is simply what can be discovered by looking at how we speak of things. This is bedrock. It is what we all agree upon, it is very certain, and so it is something we need to examine carefully. We will take a look at how we use certain basic terms. It tells us a lot about what we are quite certain is true.

We will begin with a consideration of a linguistic tool that is absolutely essential: analogy.
In one of his plays, *Romeo and Juliet*, (Act II, Scene II), Shakespeare asks, “What’s in a name?” The question is an important one. We cannot do without names; it is the names we give to things that make communication possible. We agree, for example, to call an object we are both looking at, a “rock.”

When St. Thomas Aquinas talks about analogy, he is almost always referring to a particular type of name or term. An analogical name is a word with many different but related meanings. Some people confuse the analogy of names with the analogy of being. The latter is an important metaphysical matter, but one that depends on a prior understanding of analogical names. Analogy first concerns not how things are or how they exist, but rather how they are known and named by us.

A confusion between the analogy of names and the analogy of being (*analogia entis*) seems to lie behind an attention-grabbing statement made by Karl Barth, possibly the greatest Protestant theologian of the 20th century. In the Foreword to his *Church Dogmatics*, Volume 1, he says, “… I can see no third possibility between play with the *analogia entis*, legitimate only on Roman Catholic grounds, between the greatness and the misery of a so-called natural knowledge of God in the sense of the *Vaticanum*, and a Protestant theology self-nourished at its own source, standing upon its own feet, and finally liberated from such secular misery. I can therefore only say No here. I regard the *analogia entis* as the invention of Antichrist, and think that because of it one cannot become Catholic. Whereupon I at the same time allow myself to regard all other possible reasons for not becoming Catholic as shortsighted and lacking in seriousness.”
The *Vaticanum* to which Barth refers is the First Vatican Council, which in 1870 declared that human reason is capable of arguing to the existence of God. St. Thomas’s arguments for God’s existence, as we will see, depend on the analogy of names but do not directly concern the analogy of being.

We have said that philosophy does not require special instruments like telescopes and microscopes in order to investigate reality. It needs only the knowledge we possess in our ability to speak a natural language like English. One of the most important features of such language is its use of analogy or analogical names.

Analogy, we have said, is not primarily about how things are but rather about how we talk about things. Why should we have any difficulty in talking about things? Consider the following. Human language is a means of communication. Clearly, then, it is tied to what we can designate to one another, for example, by pointing to things and identifying them by some name. Language is related to our senses; in order to have any verifiable meaning, our words must be verifiable in some way in sense experience.

Our difficulty arises from the fact that our intellect can come to discover more than our senses can perceive. St. Thomas Aquinas notes: “Since we understand some things which cannot be perceived by the senses, intellectual knowledge does go beyond sensible things” (I, 84, 6, 3rd obj.). For example, I can understand what it means to be “responsible,” but I cannot point out responsibility to you. So the question arises, how does our language follow our knowledge when that knowledge goes beyond what is directly sensed (and so beyond what can be pointed out to another)? How can our language follow knowledge beyond the senses and still remain a means of communication between people? How do I show you what I am thinking about?

**Combining Words**

One device we use is the combining of words; that is, we combine, or use in different fashion, words that originally mean something directly sensed. This is often what we discover when we investigate the etymology of a word. Consider some examples. The word *substance* is from the two Latin words *sub* meaning “under,” and *stans* meaning “standing.” I use it to designate what “stands under” the colour or height of an animal. The word *carnival* comes from *vale* meaning “goodbye,” and *carnis* meaning “meat.” Carnival was originally the farewell to meat on the Tuesday before the season of Lent began. The word *pedigree* is from the French “*pied de grue*” meaning “crane’s foot” and so suggests the shape of the lines on a genealogical chart. The word *calculus* is from the Greek word for “pebble”; think of stones used for counting, as on an abacus. Knowing the etymology of a word, therefore, is often very helpful.
Analogical Words

The most important device, however, that we use for enabling our language to follow the progress in our knowing is analogy. This consists in extending the meaning of a word. When our intellect reasons to something beyond direct sense experience, we take the name of that sensible (or sensed) reality from which our reasoning started, and we give that same name to the reality to which we have reasoned. In doing this, we invite others to follow the same reasoning process and so to reach the same reality.

For example, when I come to realize that a particular colour is a sign that an animal is healthy, I begin to speak of it having a “healthy” colour. Again, when I come to understand that there must be an ultimate, invisible cause of the food that grows in our fields, somewhat as there is a visible cause of that food, namely the “lord” (old English, “keeper of the loaves”) who is in charge of the feudal estate on which I live, I refer to that ultimate cause as “the Lord.”

An analogical word or name has many meanings. These meanings are different but related to one another. There is a first meaning, usually verifiable in direct sense experience (e.g., you could point it out), and then there are other meanings, which reflect a growth and progress in our knowing, and are more removed from sense experience.

Technically, we can speak of names or words as being univocal, that is, they have only one meaning, or equivocal, that is, they have more than one meaning. Equivocal words, for their part, may be equivocal by chance (e.g., “bark” on a tree and “bark” of a dog), or they may be equivocal on purpose. These latter words are analogical; their meanings are related to one another according to an order of prior and posterior imposition.

Take again the example of “healthy.” In its original imposition, this refers to the state of normalcy in an animal’s physical constitution. In later impositions, this same name, “healthy,” has been imposed on other things because the mind has referred the meanings of those other things to the meaning of “healthy” said of an animal. Thus we name a diet “healthy” if it preserves the health of the animal; we name a medicine “healthy” because it can restore the health of an animal; we call the animal’s colour “healthy” since it is a sign that the animal is healthy. Note the relation between the different impositions of the name here. In analogical names like “healthy,” the medicine, for example, is called “healthy” because “animal”—that of which “healthy” is first said—is part of the meaning of medicine. Thus we might define medicine as “a preparation which contributes to the health of an animal.”

Another form of analogy is the analogy of proportionality. When we say “I see what you mean,” we are saying that just as sight is to the eye, so in some way is understanding to the mind. Hence, “understanding” comes to be referred to as a kind of “seeing.”
Analogy and Talk about God

The importance of analogy for talk about God is obvious. If we used words like *being* and *existence* univocally, this would mean that “being,” “existence,” and so on, are the same for God as for us. This would destroy the transcendence of God. If we used such words equivocally, this would mean that we have no way of knowing or saying what “being,” “existence,” and so on, are for God. So we would not be able to talk about God at all or to reach any knowledge of God by reason. This is the position of classical Protestant theology (as the above quotation from Karl Barth indicates). The analogical use of such terms as *being* means that we have some sense of what it means for God to be, and that we can demonstrate the existence of God by reason, though we cannot by reason know the nature of God.

If our intelligence comes to see that there is a cause of the “being” we know, then it makes sense to call that cause “Being.” All our names for God are really derived from God’s effects, which are all we directly know. So we name God from God’s effects. It is as if we discovered strange footprints on our desert island and began to refer to the unknown cause of those footprint as “the footprint maker.” “Vocal sounds are referred to things, to signify them, through the medium of the intellectual concept. Consequently to the degree that our intellect can know something, to that degree that thing can be named by us” (I, 13, 1). Crucial to that process of “naming” is analogy.

Distinct from analogy is another linguistic device called metaphor. See Chapter 23 for discussion of this important feature of language.