

Advice on Teaching Thomism

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The future of Thomism depends on how well we teach students to do Thomism. If we continue to teach it as we have, we cannot expect it to achieve anything more than the moribund state it has been in since Vatican II. Most of our teaching is good, and much if it is excellent. But it has not met Thomism's needs. Future Thomists have not been taught how to restore Thomism to a status of significance in the contemporary arena of philosophical alternatives. Analytical philosophers, for example, mainly ignore us and only mention the phenomenological tradition as an alternative to them.

Introductory philosophy courses often use anthologies of readings. Few anthologies have included Thomistic essays. That's a good thing. Most of our work would put Thomism at a disadvantage against the other philosophies' essays. Their essays are primary sources; ours are usually written as secondary sources. Students would get a clear message: Thomism is not capable of being a progressive philosophical tradition; Aquinas' disciples cannot defend their views on their own, and much less actually *build on* past work the way any valid intellectual endeavor does.

Even some Thomists seem to believe that message. An article I know of was written for an editor who wanted something on analytical philosophy and Thomism; so the article compared Maritain and Wittgenstein. The editor made the author rewrite it to compare Aquinas and Wittgenstein. But if Aquinas couldn't produce disciples of earlier generations, even Wittgenstein's own generation, who deserve consideration, why should anyone think an article on Wittgenstein by a Thomist of this generation would be worth reading? This is Thomistic 'chronolatry' (*pace The Peasant of the Garrone*): Just as our contemporaries think only current philosophers deserve consideration, some Thomists think past Thomists cannot deserve consideration.

Students used to become interested in studying Aquinas by reading Thomists whose work was more philosophical than interpretive. Unless Thomists learn to write that way again, why should future students think Aquinas is worth studying?

But we cannot expect professors to cease teaching as they have their whole careers, especially when they are justly proud of the quality of their courses. So how can students learn to do Thomism differently? I have a proposal that would require professors to make only the most minimal changes in their courses but would teach students to do Thomism in the way necessary for it to contend for respect on an equal footing with other current philosophies.

Professors should teach students to present Thomism the way Yves Simon did. Many have praised Simon's way of writing philosophy, but no one seems to have noticed the most obvious feature of his method of presenting Thomism: He has plenty of interpretive discussions of Aristotelian/Thomistic texts; but he does that almost exclusively in his footnotes. The bodies of his books and articles consist almost entirely of philosophical analyses and arguments that stand on their own without any textual or historical dependence. So he is able to do much interpreting of Aristotelian/Thomistic texts without obscuring the fact that his work is philosophy, not interpretation, that his conclusions demand to be judged by the philosophical quality of his analyses independently of their historical sources.

Teaching students to present Thomism as it needs to be presented can be done without major changes to existing interpretive courses. Professors have only to require students to write their papers in that style, require students to, as much as possible, do textual and historical interpretation in the notes while the bodies of the papers consist of philosophical discussions that can stand on their own apart from their textual sources. Keeping historical discussions in the notes is not something that can always be completely achieved; Simon didn't. But it is 'a concrete historical ideal' (*pace Integral Humanism*), an

ideal we must strive for, not merely wish for. Obviously, this advice applies more to graduate students than undergraduates. And for writing dissertations, it should only be required of students who have already demonstrated sufficient philosophical ability in papers done for courses; other students should be allowed to write interpretive dissertations.

Students will need models of this style to imitate; so some professors might have to make changes to their required readings. But even less advanced students will be more interested in Thomism done by people they see thinking rigorously on their own, as opposed to just commenting on someone else's past philosophizing. Fortunately, an abundance of Simon is available. Others, for example, Joseph Owens (see *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics*), sometimes wrote in this style; my 'Natural Obligation', *The Thomist*, 2002, is mainly in this style (see especially notes 15, 16 and 24). And people like Mortimer Adler, John Wild, Henry Veatch and Francis Parker (to mention only past philosophers rather than risk leaving someone living out) can provide professors with many examples showing students how Thomism needs to be written to remain viable: philosophically not interpretively.

Would the twentieth century have seen so much interest in studying the texts of Aquinas if other Thomists weren't making Thomism work as a contemporary philosophy?