

The Thomistic Realism of Étienne Gilson: Presentation Script
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Introduction

My name is Steve Schultz. Welcome to my presentation on the Thomistic realism of Étienne Gilson prepared for the summer 2012 semester of the epistemology course through Holy Apostles College and Seminary. This presentation is a general introduction to Gilson and the philosophy of Thomistic realism. As such, it's designed to be accessible for the "average" educated person. Thus, I've made an effort to avoid, as much as possible, getting bogged down in overly-complicated, technical aspects of philosophy. Instead, the goal of this presentation is to introduce Gilson to the audience member and, by means of this brief introduction, to encourage further study of Gilson's writings on Thomistic realism.

Summary

Here is an overview of the presentation. First, we will cover some background on the Gilson's life, academic training, and work. Next, we will briefly consider the main schools of philosophical thought. Since so much of modern philosophy rests on Descartes' fundamental mistake, our attention turns next to a critique of Cartesianism. After this, we will explore Thomistic realism, paying special attention to Gilson's defense of Thomistic realism against the neo-scholastics of his day. Finally, we will attempt to move from the realm of ideas to practicality by considering the question: why does it matter?

Gilson's Life¹

Gilson was born to a Catholic family in Paris on June 13, 1884. As a boy, he attended the minor seminary at Notre-Dame-des-Champs. During his compulsory military service, Gilson began reading Descartes, prompting a deep interest in philosophy. Following his military service, Gilson began his academic career, earning the equivalent of a bachelor's degree in philosophy in

1907, and successfully defending his doctoral thesis on “Liberty in Descartes and Theology” in 1913.

The outbreak of World War I put Gilson’s academic aspirations on hold. In 1914, Gilson was mobilized as a sergeant in the French Army. His valor in combat earned a battlefield commission to Second Lieutenant of Infantry. Gilson was captured in February 1916 during the Battle of Verdun and held as a German prisoner of war for the remainder of the conflict.

Following the war, Gilson began teaching history of philosophy at the University of Strasbourg and the history of medieval philosophy at the University of Paris. Thanks to his renowned as a professor of philosophy, Gilson secured important overseas teaching posts. Gilson’s work overseas included three years at Harvard University and his establishment of the Institute for Medieval Studies at the University of Toronto in Canada. On October 24, 1946, Gilson was elected to the French Academy, becoming the oldest member ever elected. Along with receiving honorary doctorates from a number of universities, Gilson authored over six hundred articles and books throughout his lifetime. Gilson died on September 19, 1978.

Gilson the Thomist?

While now known as one of history’s foremost Thomists, Gilson did not begin with the work of St. Thomas. As he tells us,

I was educated in a French Catholic college, which I left, after seven years of studies, without having heard even once, at least as far as I remember, the name of Saint Thomas Aquinas. When the time came for me to study philosophy I went to a state-controlled college, whose professor of philosophy, a belated disciple of Victor Cousin, had certainly never read a line of Thomas Aquinas. At the Sorbonne, no one of my professors knew anything about his doctrine. All that I learned concerning it was that, were anyone enough of a fool to read it, he would find there an expression of that Scholasticism which, since the time of Descartes, had become a mere piece of mental archeology. To me, however, philosophy was neither Descartes nor even Kant; it was Bergson, the genius whose lectures still remain in my memory as so many hours of intellectual transfiguration ... [Yet,] the man to whom I am indebted for my first knowledge of Saint Thomas was a Jew. [Lucien Levy-Bruhl] had never opened a single one of the works of

Thomas, nor did he intend ever to do so. But he was, besides many other good things, a man of an almost uncanny intelligence, with a surprising gift of seeing facts in an impartial, cold, and objective light, just as they were... When, two years later, I went to him for a subject of a thesis, he advised me to study the vocabulary and, eventually, the matter borrowed from Scholasticism by Descartes... Historically speaking [my thesis] is now out of date, but its nine long years of preparation taught me two things: first, to read Saint Thomas Aquinas; secondly, that Descartes had vainly tried to solve, by means of his now famous method, philosophical problems whose only correct position and solution were inseparable from the method of Saint Thomas Aquinas. In other words... I discovered that the only context in which the metaphysical conclusions of Descartes made sense was the metaphysics of Saint Thomas Aquinas.²

Thus, with this intellectual background on Gilson, we now turn to an examination of leading schools of epistemology.

A Question of Universals

Former Fordham University professor Daniel Sullivan posits that the central question dividing schools of philosophy regards problem of universals. Namely, a philosophy can be classified according to how it answers the question: “What is the nature of ideas?” As he says, how a philosopher answers this question “is the key not only to what he holds about the nature of thought but also to his teaching on man and the universe.”³

The primary philosophical conflict regarding universals comes down to a metaphysical argument regarding “the objective, ontological status of essences that are perceived universally by the intellect and that are seen to exist in many individuals.”⁴ Do universals exist on their own, as merely constructs of the mind, or as something else? We turn now to examine how various schools of thought have sought to answer these questions.

Absolute Realism

Absolute realism was first espoused in the philosophy of Plato. According to this position, universals are real things existing by themselves. We find a radical separation between the world of ideas and the world of bodies. For Plato, the body is the tomb of the soul. Says

Sullivan, “Reality is referred so exclusively to the ideas that the world of bodies is an indigestible fact or else it is dismissed as illusion.”⁵

Since it is the concept or the idea of a thing which persists in unchanging perfection, it is these ideas (manhood, triangularity, etc.), says Plato, which must be real and are the objects of the intellect. The individual things we see and handle are changeable and perishable, and are not ideas; therefore they must not be reality. Instead, these things are merely “likenesses” or “participations” of the ideas. It is the ideas alone which are the essences and the perfections of things.⁶

Conceptualism

During the eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant introduced a modification of the doctrine of absolute realism. Rejecting the Platonic concept of the idea or universal existing as an independent spiritual reality, “Kant placed the universal idea in the mind as a ‘form’ or category, a structural necessity of thought itself, a kind of mold into which our thoughts are cast.”⁷ While we think of things as universals, this is due purely to the structure of our minds and has no real relation to the outside world. In other words, for the conceptualist, universals are merely mental concepts.

Kant says the nature of the outside world, the “thing-in-itself” or the *Noumenon*, is unknowable. This is due to the fact the mind “re-casts” the information it receives according to its structure. Thus, the only things of which we are aware are the results of this activity, or the *Phenomenon*.⁸

Followers of Kant, taking his concepts even further, claim that in fact nothing at all exists outside the mind itself. These so-called *idealists* “reduce all reality to the nature of mind and idea.”⁹

Nominalism

The next epistemological school, nominalism, completely denies the existence of universals. For the nominalist, the universal does not exist either inside or outside the mind, but is merely a name we assign to our sense impressions. The term nominalism itself comes from the eleventh century philosopher Roscelin. He claimed our ideas are nothing but names, *nomina*, or “puffs of breath,” standing for nothing.¹⁰

Since for the nominalist everything is merely ideas, he must admit to either one of two realities. As Sullivan tells us, “Either he is a *Materialist*, and admits the existence of bodies only, or he is an *Idealist*, who says what we call sensations are mental modifications, which along with mind constitute the whole of reality.”¹¹

Moderate Realism

Standing in opposition to the epistemologies so far discussed is the position of moderate realism. Moderate realism describes the classical Aristotelian and Thomistic philosophical position. It is the school of thought so well defended by Gilson in his writings.

The moderate realist holds that what is known exists as a universal in the mind, the intellect, but outside the intellect, it exists as an individual. This is a realist position since it holds that universals really do exist in the mind; however it is moderate since it holds that their existence does not extend beyond the mind. Again quoting Sullivan, “Since the form universalized in the intellect is identical with the form individualized in the thing, we can say, following the traditional formula that our ideas are universal in the intellect only, but have a foundation in things.”¹² Thus, moderate realism gives rise to the concept of the spirituality of the intellect as a requirement for the universals to there exist, as well as supporting the concept of the matter and form composition of all created things, including man.

We now turn to look specifically at Gilson's apology (in the classic sense) of moderate realism, or to use his term, methodical realism.

Dismissal of Scholasticism

Gilson tells us one of the first problems encountered in modern philosophy is its rather abrupt and complete dismissal of scholasticism as, at best, a quaint "old fashioned" notion. As he says, "What the opponents of the scholastic tradition blame it for – when they condescend to concern themselves with it – is either not being a philosophy at all because tainted by its connections with theology, or being a dogmatic and naïve realism which has no idea at all what critical idealism is and which has stopped short at the threshold of true philosophy."¹³

Yet, Gilson tells us, in attempting to defend scholasticism, the neo-scholastics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries make the capital mistake of attempting to use the idealist method to establish the realist position. In this, we find much similarity to the mistake of Descartes. Notes Gilson, while Descartes was an idealist in method, he was a realist in intent; a position which, as we shall now examine, simply does not work.¹⁴

Descartes' Reversal

You see, Descartes was a mathematician. Mathematics, Gilson says, always proceeds from thought to things. Thus, idealism came into being when Descartes decided he could apply the method of mathematics as a method for metaphysics. In doing so, Descartes completely reversed the method of Aristotle and the medievals; instead of inferring knowing from being, Descartes posited that it was valid to infer being from knowing – and not simply a valid inference, but the *only* valid inference.¹⁵ Gilson further notes of Descartes:

After passing twenty centuries as the very model of those self-evident facts that only a madman would ever dream of doubting, the existence of the external world finally received its metaphysical demonstration from Descartes. Yet no sooner had he demonstrated the existence of the external world than his disciples realized that, not only

was he proof worthless, but the very principles which made such a demonstration necessary at the same time rendered the attempted proof impossible.¹⁶

Let us consider further the problem created by Descartes.

The Bridge Problem

The problem created by Descartes, one which philosophy has attempted to overcome ever since, involves the issue of moving from the mind to the object. In order to do so, we must have a bridge. Yet, the Achilles' heel of Descartes method is that, try as we might, we are unable to do so; instead remaining trapped inside our own thought. If our thought begins from a mental representation, it can never move beyond it. French philosopher Monsignor Noël puts it thus:

From the duplicate or image there is no way of reaching the thing itself. Once trapped in immanence, the duplicate is only a mental symbol and will remain such. The principle of causality does not in the least change the situation. If you have a hook painted on the wall, the only thing you will ever be able to hang from it is a chain also painted on the wall. Belief and dogmatic assertion will help us even less; as essentially interior acts, they cannot get us out of our prison either.¹⁷

“In other words,” says Gilson, “he who begins as an idealist ends as an idealist; one cannot safely make a concession or two to idealism here and there.”¹⁸ It is on this point where Gilson goes on to soundly scold the neo-scholastics for their mistake in attempting to argue for scholasticism by starting with idealism:

Cogito ergo res sunt is pure Cartesianism, that is to say, the exact opposite of what is thought of as scholastic realism and the cause of its ruin. Nobody has tried as hard as Descartes to build a bridge from thought to things, by relying on the principle of causality. He was also the first to make the attempt and he did so because he was forced to by having set the starting point for knowledge in the intuition of thought. It is, therefore, strictly true that every scholastic who thinks himself a realist, because he accepts this way of starting the problem, is in fact a Cartesian.¹⁹

Consciousness as Container

As Professor Kenneth Gallagher tells us, “any evaluation of Descartes should center not on his methodic doubt but on the accuracy of his description of consciousness.”²⁰ For Descartes,

consciousness is a container “in” which reality exists. Here the trap is sprung, for once we begin thinking of consciousness in this manner, we find there is no escape to the objects themselves.

“If what I know is ‘in’ my consciousness, then how does it ever allow me to make contact with what is ‘outside’ my consciousness. My consciousness is *my* consciousness, a subjective occurrence in me; hence if the reality which I know is ‘within’ my consciousness, it is within me, and my knowledge therefore leaves me locked up inside myself.”²¹

Descartes began this notion of attempting to isolate the consciousness, and it has perpetuated in one form or another in much of modern philosophy ever since. However, it represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the human person. Sullivan makes this point clear:

Although we can isolate the component parts of man’s consciousness in order to study them, the very fact that they are found existing together, reciprocally influencing each other, is itself one of the elements which we must take into account. We must remember, for example, that man is a feeling as well as knowing being, and the process of knowing always takes place against a background of feeling and emotion. Similarly, although we study sense knowing and intellectual knowing as separate processes, in man they are never found in isolation from one another. “Properly speaking,” says St. Thomas, “neither sense nor intellect knows, but man through both.”²²

Thomas vs. Descartes

For Descartes, “consciousness is primarily self-consciousness and only derivatively consciousness of the other.”²³ The Cartesian primarily knows himself and must infer from the self to the other (a point which has introduced a slew of epistemological problems and solutions). On the other hand, for St. Thomas and the scholastics, “the self is only known reflexively in the knowing of the non-self.”²⁴ Thus, the Thomist only knows himself through knowing the other; knowledge of self cannot be separated from knowledge of the object.

Professor Raymond Dennehy echoes this point when he notes of contemporary idealist objections to realism: “...the inability of contemporary American theories of knowledge to validate the central claim of realist epistemology – that some of our concepts refer to

corresponding entities in the external world – is inextricably bound up with a failure to grasp the essential contribution of the knowing-self in the subject-object relation that constitutes knowledge...too many epistemologists take too much for granted by failing to see that the knower contributes more to knowing than just forming beliefs, having memories and mental states, and imposing prejudices, feelings, and expectations...This neglect results in a representationalist epistemology...This third thing between the knower and the known makes realism impossible to justify since, then, the object of knowledge is the concept within me, whereas realism, on the contrary, claims that assertions about the external world must have corresponding external realities.”²⁵

Bi-Polarity of Consciousness

St. Thomas holds that the mind’s knowledge of itself means knowing itself as a capacity for truth (or a capacity for the other). Thus, without having already reached the other, the mind “could not know itself as this capacity for reaching the other.”²⁶ With this, unlike the idealist, the Thomist has no problem getting outside himself, since consciousness necessarily involves being outside the self.²⁷ Our circle of awareness already includes the other.

As Edmund Husserl noted in his concept of “intentionality,” all consciousness is “consciousness of” something.²⁸ Awareness means awareness *of* something. The act of consciousness necessarily involves an act in reference to something outside itself. Once we understand this point, we realize “we do not have to win our way out from subjectivity to objectivity, for we never find ourselves within pure subjectivity.”²⁹

Descartes held that the cogito-self was an *individual* thinking subject only aware with certainty of its own thinking self.³⁰ Yet, as we have just seen, this is impossible since as an individual thinking subject, the self is only aware of itself in reference to the object of its

thought. Says Professor Gallagher, “I do not discover myself as an individual self except in *relation to* what is other than myself. Consciousness is *bi-polar*: it is essentially relational. To say consciousness is first of all to say self-aware-of-non-self.”³¹

The Idealist Catoblepas

It is for these reasons Gilson warns, “He who begins with Descartes cannot avoid ending up with Berkeley or Kant...Like those mythical animals, the Catoblepas, all idealist philosophers devour their own feet without realizing it...the idealist method is the suicide of philosophy...because it engages philosophy in an inextricable series of internal contradictions that ultimately draw it into skepticism – which could be called self-liberation through suicide...*I think therefore I am* is a truth, but it is not a starting point.”³²

Gilson recalls a quote from Professor A. N. Whitehead of Harvard which succinctly sums up the problem: “When you find your theory of knowledge won’t work, it’s because there is something wrong with your metaphysics.”³³

Scholastic Epistemology?

At this point, it should not come as a surprise that scholasticism does not recognize an epistemological problem as its starting point. Unlike idealism, in its failed attempt to build a bridge between object and subject, scholasticism recognized as a postulate and not a conclusion the existence of object as distinct from subject. As a philosophy, or a science of first principles and first causes, by its very nature scholasticism seeks to discover “a set of self-evident first principles in accord with each other and with experience.”³⁴ It is for this reason Gilson adamantly maintains, “What we must do first of all, therefore, is free ourselves from the obsession with epistemology as the necessary precondition for philosophy.”³⁵

Realism over Idealism

Gilson goes on to provide us this rousing defense of scholastic realism coupled with a sound thrashing of idealism:

So there was nothing naïve about scholastic realism; it was the realism of the traveler with a destination in view who, seeing that he is approaching it, feels confident he is on the right road. And the realism we are proposing will be even less naïve since it is based on the same evidence as the old realism and is further justified by the study of three centuries of idealism and the balance sheet of their results...What is necessary is that epistemology, instead of being the pre-condition for ontology, should grow in it and with it, being at the same time a means and an object of explanation, helping to uphold, and itself upheld by, ontology, as the parts of any true philosophy mutually will sustain each other...[I]n idealism, nothing works. One ought not therefore to look for the remedy to idealism along the idealist path. The only conceivable remedy is to change one's metaphysics. No one can overcome idealism by opposing it from the inside, because one cannot oppose it in such a way without surrendering to it. Idealism can only be overcome by dispensing with its very existence.³⁶

Put simply, scholastic realism is the only philosophical system which describes lived reality with a logical consistency. Every other competing school of thought, including the neo-scholastic approach, takes as its starting point the subject in isolation from the object. With this “turn to the subject,” we are left with only two solutions: either attempt to build a bridge to objective reality (which is, as Gilson soundly demonstrates, an impossibility) or, having discovered the impossibility of bridging that gap, to give up all together and reduce everything to total subjectivity. While such positions might prove interesting and entertaining academic exercises, neither accurately describes what we know to be our lived reality.

Why Does It Matter?

This brings us to our final question: why does it matter? Does not all this simply represent academic exercises of smart people devising clever ways to say silly things? After all,

the Roman philosopher-statesman Cicero once observed, “There is nothing so absurd that it can’t be said by a philosopher.”³⁷ I answer these questions with this story:

Thomas Carlyle, the eminent Scottish essayist and sometime philosopher, was once scolded at a dinner party for endlessly chattering about books: “Ideas, Mr. Carlyle, ideas, nothing but ideas!” To which he replied, “There once was a man called Rousseau who wrote a book containing nothing but ideas. The second edition was bound in the skins of those who laughed at the first.”³⁸

Ideas matter because ideas have consequences; and bad ideas result in bad consequences. Not only do bad ideas have bad consequences, they become worse with repetition; as Aristotle observed, “The least initial deviation from the truth is multiplied later a thousand-fold.”³⁹ For proof we need only look to not-so-distant history to discover the millions who died as the result of bad ideas as expressed in philosophies of Nazism and Marxism. Closer to home, we might consider the over 1.3 million human persons aborted every year in the United States alone – all the result of bad epistemology which ultimately traces its roots back to Descartes’ turn to the subject. Once we lose a firm grasp true philosophy, we soon find it possible to rationalize nearly anything. It is for this reason that philosophy matters.

Final Thoughts

In closing, I leave you with the words of Étienne Gilson:

For helping me, as you have so lavishly done, by your attention and sympathetic fidelity, even the warmest thanks would remain an inadequate recompense. Were it in my power to do so, I would rather leave you with a gift. Not wisdom, which I have not and no man can give, but the next best thing: the love for wisdom, for which philosophy is but another word. For to love wisdom is also to love science, and prudence; it is to seek peace in the inner accord of each mind with itself and in the mutual accord of all minds.⁴⁰

Endnotes

- ¹ This brief sketch of Gilson's life is derived from: "Étienne Gilson," *Académie française* (online at <http://www.academie-francaise.fr/les-immortels/etienne-gilson>, accessed 8 August 2012).
- ² Étienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy: Second Edition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), xxii – xxiv.
- ³ Daniel J. Sullivan, *An Introduction to Philosophy: Perennial Principles of the Classical Realist Tradition* (Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 1992), 71.
- ⁴ William A. Wallace, *The Elements of Philosophy: A Compendium for Philosophers and Theologians* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012), 24.
- ⁵ Sullivan, 72.
- ⁶ Jacques Maritain, *An Introduction to Philosophy* (New York, NY: Sheed and Ward, 1959), 57 – 58.
- ⁷ Sullivan, 72 – 73.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 72 – 73.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 72 – 73.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 73.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 72.
- ¹³ Étienne Gilson, *Methodical Realism: A Handbook for Beginning Realists* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2011), 11.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11-12.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.
- ¹⁶ Étienne Gilson, *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2012), 27.
- ¹⁷ As quoted in Gilson, *Methodical Realism*, 14.
- ¹⁸ Gilson, *Methodical Realism*, 14.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.
- ²⁰ Kenneth T. Gallagher, *The Philosophy of Knowledge* (New York, NY: Sheed and Ward, 1964) 44.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 45.
- ²² Sullivan, 75.
- ²³ Gallagher, 47.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.
- ²⁵ Raymond Dennehy, "The Loss of the Knowing Subject In Contemporary Epistemology" in Douglas A. Ollivant, ed., *Jacques Maritain and the Many Ways of Knowing* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 128.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 48-49.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 50.
- ³² Gilson, *Methodical Realism*, 15, 23, 24.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 25.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.
- ³⁷ Benjamin Wiker, PhD, *10 Books that Screwed Up the Word: And 5 Others That Didn't Help* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2008), 1.
- ³⁸ Wiker, 2.
- ³⁹ As quoted in: Mortimer Adler, *Ten Philosophical Mistakes* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1987), xiii.
- ⁴⁰ Étienne Gilson, *The Unity of the Philosophical Experience* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1999), 257.