

# **Thomistic Epistemology: The Anthropic Act of Intellection**

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of PHH 781: Philosophy of St. Thomas  
Aquinas

Holy Apostles College and Seminary

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Aquinas

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What follows is an explication of defense of Thomas's doctrine of Anthropology in relation to Epistemology. More particularly, the following essay delves into question 84 of Thomas's Summa, "How the soul while united to the body understands corporeal things beneath it." In light of this, the paper begins with an explication of positions preceding Thomas on the question (notably the Pre-Socratics and Plato). It then proceeds to discuss, in brief, the position of Aristotle. Next, it explicates Thomas's own position. Fourth, it discusses Modern Epistemologists - particularly, the doctrines of Descartes, Locke, and Kant - and distinguishes Thomas's position from theirs. Finally, it concludes with reflection on the consequent merits of Thomas's answer to the question and relates it to other significant aspects in philosophy. The purpose of the essay is to provide a persuasive case that Thomistic-Empiricism is a more persuasive system than the alternatives here explicated.

## **The Ancients**

### *The Pre-Socratics on Mind-Body Intellection*

The pre-socratics were fixated on the question of change; all reality bears resemblance in form. From what principle could the unity of reality (the one) and the difference in reality (the many) be explicated? Thales contended that ultimate reality was water - water explained the uniformity and plurality of nature. Anaximander, more mysteriously, posited an "indeterminate boundless" which contained within it an "eternal motion" resulting in the consequent cosmos. Anaximanes found this notion unintelligible and posited a via media between Thales material water and Anaximander's immaterial boundless. He posited that air is the ultimate cause of the

unity and the flux of reality. The Pythagoreans posited that ultimate reality consisted in number. Thus they distinguished between form (the limits of a things) and matter.<sup>1</sup>

Heraclitus and Parmenides continued this discussion, but added another element to the conversation, the question of motion. Parmenides ultimately concluded that all reality is one and that change is an illusion. Heraclitus, on the other hand, contended that ultimate reality is a flux. He is famous for his quotation that you can never stand in the same river twice, because it is always in motion. For Heraclitus, ultimate reality consisted in fire (a substance always changing). Heraclitus also posited the notion of logos as the universal transcendent in humanity. What this doctrine ultimately boils down to is a form of “epistemic concurrency” between all things even as they are, ultimately, fire. The brain is made of fire - the couch is made of fire. Thus, that which unites my mind to the couch in the form of knowledge ultimately consists in fire. Where exactly Heraclitus is justifying the concept of “mind” is uncertain. Where he is drawing the “concurrency” between mind and object is explicit: all things are united in that they are rooted in fire.

As above stated, the pre-socratics were focused primarily on the question of ultimate reality, yet they also spoke to the question of mind-body intellection. For Thales, Anaximander, and Heraclitus, there is a concurrency between mental, self-conscious reality and the external world - namely, some element of matter. For the Pythagoreans this “concurrency” consisted ultimately in the relation of mind to number; the subject can know number, thus he can know the form of objects.<sup>2</sup> At any rate, these philosophers were concerned with different questions and thus did not inquire into the relation between body and mind as much as Aristotle and Thomas.

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<sup>1</sup> Stumpf, Samuel Enoch and Feiser, James, *Philosophy: History and Problems*. McGraw Hill, 2003. Pgs. 5-14.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Pgs. 15-18.

### *Plato on Mind-Body Intellection*

Plato also concerned himself with questions of mind/body, intellection, mechanism, and concurrency. He though, more than any before his time in the writings, developed these many facets into a self-conscious system of thought. As such, Plato is justly deemed the father of rationalism. His system bears all the marks of the conventional “rationalist” label, but also includes his theory of forms. These marks are as follows: skepticism regarding the senses, a focus on the primacy of inward reflection in intellection (and consequently a focus on deduction), and the doctrine of innate ideas.

Plato disparaged of the senses. In his analogy of the cave, the senses are likened to shadows cast onto the wall of a cave. They give information, but not of the highest reality. In fact, the best the senses can do is to “aggravate” the subject to seeking after the true knowledge which is contained in the forms alone. Through the sensible world, the individual is not given that which constitutes “knowledge” or “certainty.” Rather, he is everywhere surrounded by an unaccountable flux from which the only escape is the salvation of philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

These forms, Plato posited, exist in a metaphysical realm which are accessed through the intellect alone. Through reflection - rigorous philosophical inquiry (dialectic), - one can “access” the forms of the mind through rescinding the material unclarity of embodied existence through rational introspection. In other words, the manner in which one is to gain knowledge is internal, introspective, and mental. Through introverted thinking, one goes “inside himself” as it were and enters into the realm of the forms contained within his own mind, even though it is stimulated by the dialectic.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, Simon and Brown, 2011. Trans. Benjamin Jowett. Pgs. 540-545

<sup>4</sup> Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology*, P&R Publishing. 2005. Pg. 64.

Yet these forms, which are contained within the mind, are the by-product of the primary reality, a cosmically prior, a-temporal, and immaterial realm wherein the highest “reality” exists. The person bears in himself knowledge of the forms through it’s prior pre-embodied existence. In it’s union with the body, the soul was made subject to corruption. Yet, through philosophical investigation, one can rescind the uncertain sensible world unto certain, true, immutable knowledge of the forms. Thus there is, in Plato, not a concurrency between the external world and the subject, but between the subject and the realm of transcendent certainty. The body, for Plato, is not the mechanism through which knowledge is attained; rather, it is the mechanism through which knowledge is corrupted.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Aristotle on Mind/Body Intellection*

It has been stated that Aristotle demythologizes Plato. He has largely similar concerns with Plato, yet has a radically different answer regarding the location of the forms and the nature of intellection (how we receive knowledge). Aristotle posits that intellection begins first in the senses (Empiricism), the mind is without innate forms (ideas), and the senses convey to the form of substances (Realism).

In his *Physics*, Aristotle distinguishes between Metaphysical and Epistemological ordering. He states that inquiry pursues causality: “...In all pursuits in which there are sources or causes or elements, it is by way of our acquaintance with these that knowing and understanding come to us...”<sup>6</sup> (*physics* 33). He then distinguishes between ultimate or principal causality and

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<sup>5</sup> For more on this, see the cave analogy. The prisoners enslaved status represents embodied existence. The shadows on the wall represent the unclarity of sense perception. The visible world under the sun represents the world of the forms. Finally, the sun which illumines all represents the form of the good.

Plato, *The Republic*, Simon and Brown, 2011. Trans. Benjamin Jowett. Pgs. 540-545

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, *Physics*. Rutgers University Press New Brunswick and London. Trans. Joe Sachs, Pg. 33.

the relation of “things” to us. He states, “...it is clear that also for the knowledge of nature one must try to mark out what pertains to its sources. On the other hand, the natural road is from what is more familiar and clearer to us to what is clearer and better known by nature; for it is not the same things that are well known to us and well known simply.”<sup>7</sup> The understanding of this phrase is essential to understanding Aristotelian Epistemology. The order of knowledge is from things “to us” to things “in themselves.”

For Aristotle, this works by sensible phantasms experienced by the subject being reflected upon and understood in terms of their form. Aristotle distinguishes between beings with sensation alone, beings with sensation and memory, and beings with sensation, memory, and those that, “...live by art and reasonings.”<sup>8</sup> He then defines experience as the result of a “common sense” through which “...many notions,” are gained “...by experience of one universal judgment about a class of objects...” Experience, in other words, beings with sense-phantasms, is connected through memory, and connected through the human mind. This “sensus communis” distinguishes man from beast and plant. This experience, received through the ability to connect memory and sensation into a singular whole, is then abstracted by the active intellect unto the universal.<sup>9</sup>

The form of the object is instantiated into the object. That form is apprehended by the rational soul. That person, who is endowed with sensation and memory, has the ability to connect various phantasms of the same substantial form into a common experience of a genus. That

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<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *Physics*. Trans. Joe Sachs, Pg. 33.

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*. In *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, Edited by Richard McKeon, The Modern Library New York. 2001. Pg. 689.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 689-690.

genus is then abstracted by the active intellect unto a universal (a definition of the form). This is the mechanism of knowledge in Aristotle - a relation between the subject and object such that the act of intellection is attained by various degrees. Aristotle, then, teaches that the substantial form of the world is received through the phantasms of the sensible aspects of man. These sensibles are “archived” if you will, through memory. The man, then, through the *sensus communis*, relates substantial forms which are similar into a singular experience and, upon reflection, is able to give a definition of the form (the universal; from sense to memory to experience to universal).

### **Thomas on Soul/Body Intellection**

Thomas’s first question in *Summa Theologia* 84 is whether the soul knows bodies through the intellect. His answer is, essentially, yes. If the soul is unable to know external bodies then science is rendered impossible. Thomas then responds to the pre-socratic philosophers on the question and Plato. He details how the pre-socratics were essentially Materialists because they, “...thought there was nothing in the world save bodies.”<sup>10</sup> He then posits that Plato came along in order to “...save the certitude” from the pre-socratics (in this case Hericlitus) who left the world in a state of flux devoid of certainty. He notes how, in order to save certainty, Plato postulated his theory of the forms connected to innate ideas. This doctrine, though, in Thomas’s mind, renders science impossible because our knowledge is not about the physical world of the senses, but the “real world” of the forms.

In response to this, he reiterates his initial objection against Plato that such a doctrine would destroy knowlege, but adds a second and important rebuttal. He points out the idiocy of seeking knowledge of sensible things in a realm which is essentially different than that which

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<sup>10</sup> *STI*. Q. 84, art 1.

comes under the auspices of the senses. Thomas argues that Plato's reason for this move is to save epistemic concurrency: "Now it seems that Plato strayed from the truth because, having observed that all knowledge takes place through some kind of similitude, he thought that the form of the thing known must of necessity be in the knower in the same manner as in the thing known. Then he observed that the form of the thing understood is in the intellect under conditions of universality, immateriality, and immobility: which is apparent from the very operation of the intellect, whose act of understanding has a universal extension, and is subject to a certain amount of necessity: for the mode of action corresponds to the mode of the agent's form. Wherefore he concluded that the things which we understand must have in themselves an existence under the same conditions of immateriality and immobility."<sup>11</sup>

It is then, at this section, that Thomas introduces his distinctive doctrine of epistemic concurrency. Remember, for the moment, that the pre-socratics argued that concurrency ultimately exists because of the metaphysical unity of "fire" or "water" which exists between the subject and the objective realms of reality. Note also that this postulation is ultimately destructive because it fails to account for the immaterial aspects of personal experience (thought and emotions). Plato, distinctively, posited that the epistemic concurrency which results in knowledge is constituted by the mind's relation to the external forms. In so doing, Plato located knowledge in a realm outside the senses. In so doing, he destroyed science and any knowledge persons could have of the empirical world. Thomas, though, in order to retain the "soul" of Plato and the "matter" of the pre-socratics, posits, with Aristotle, that the mind apprehends the *form* of sensible bodies, not its matter. In other words, the mind concurs with the object, not in that it

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<sup>11</sup> ST I. Q. 84, art 1. respondeo 1-3.

“receives the gold” of the gold plate, but the forms of sensible things without its matter.

In so doing, Thomas retains sensibility, science, and the like without decaying into Materialism.

He then continues by asking whether the soul understands corporeal things through its essence.<sup>12</sup> Recall Plato: Plato posited that the man understands the form of things through looking inwardly. Through an inward “rememberance” the subject attains pre-embodied knowledge of the eternal forms and thus “knows” substances which are more real than sensible data. The pre-socratics posited that knowledge is possible because the “ultimacy” which is contained in matter is contained in the mind; but this has to be false because the “matter,” if it is inhabited by the same source which produces my thoughts, must also contain “mind” and it obviously doesn’t.

The soul, therefore, for Thomas, does not understand corporeal things through its essence. The mind, in Thomas’s view, is not endowed with the totality of truth and reality. Rather, the mind is necessarily dependent upon externality for its knowledge. This phenomena is also what accounts for gradation in reality between analogous things. Thomas states, “...therefore the intellect which abstracts the species not only from matter, but also from the individuating conditions of matter, has more perfect knowledge than the senses, which receive the form of the thing known, without matter indeed, but subject to material conditions.”<sup>13</sup>

Man, in Thomas’s view, is an intelligible creature fit with the potential for intellection but is, “...like a blank tablet on which nothing is written.”<sup>14</sup> Man is fit with the potential for knowledge and this potential is reduced to act, “...through the action of sensible objects on his

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<sup>12</sup> *STI*. Q. 84, art 2.

<sup>13</sup> *STI*. Q. 84, art 2, respondeo, 3.

<sup>14</sup> *STI*. Q. 84 art 3, sed contra.

senses, to the act of sensation - by instruction or discovery...we must say that the cognitive soul is in potentiality both to the images which are the principles of sensing, and to those which are the principles of understanding.”<sup>15</sup> Thus Thomas distinguishes between levels of knowledge; sensing and understanding. The former is by sensation and a necessary condition for the latter. The latter is by abstraction and is based upon the active intellect in relation to that which was received by sensation.

Thomas, though, ultimately proceeds further into *Metaphysics* than Aristotle. For Thomas, through the body/mind relation in sensation/abstraction, the derived mind comes into concurrency with the divine mind (not univocally, but analogically). In other words, through intellection, man is able to ascertain exemplary causes. Thomas states, “Now the unchangeable truth is contained in the eternal types. Therefore the intellectual soul knows all things in the eternal types.” This is the closest Thomas gets to Platonism. He doesn’t relegate the “realm of the forms” to some Metaphysical *deus ex machina*, rather, he relegates the forms to the mind of God Himself.

This final doctrine he bases on faith. He states, “...it seems contrary to faith that forms of things should subsist of themselves, outside the things themselves and apart from matter, as the Platonists held...therefore Augustine, for the ideas defended by Plato, substituted the types of all creatures existing in the Divine mind, according to which types all things are made in themselves...” It is important, though, to maintain that mankind does not see the forms, “as God does” in this life. That is for the blessed in the beatific vision.

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<sup>15</sup> *ST I*. Q. 84, art 2, respondeo 1.

In sum, Thomas's doctrine is that intellection is based, Metaphysically, on the mind of God which is conveyed, ephetypally to creatures through the "natural light" which is in them according to His own creation. That "natural light" manifests itself through rational-creatures who are both sensible and endowed with souls. The sensible and the soul are mutually concurrent in the act of intellection for humans. Through the sensible, the man is presented the substantial form of externals. Through the sensible apprehension of multiple externals bearing the same form, he derives a "common experience" of that form. Through that common experience, and active reflection, he is able, via intuition, to deduce the universal.

### **Thomistic Empiricism and Modernist Epistemology**

The purpose of this section is to distinguish Thomistic Realism from Locke, Descartes, and Kant. The former two are Modernist representatives of Empiricism and Rationalism respectively and the latter attempted a synthesis between the two which bears mentioning. The result is the deduction of a form of critical realism based on Thomistic interaction with Kant which differs from Nominalistic Empiricism and Kantianism with the alternative of Critical Realism. Critical Realism differs from Naive Realism in that it posits a transcendental rational for the postulation of Realism.

#### *Descartian Rationalism*

Though Descartes was a faithful Catholic his Philosophy was a departure from that of Thomas. Descartes pursued certainty through doubt as opposed to faith seeking understanding. His methodology was to doubt the deliverance of his senses and every proposition which, in the end, couldn't be rendered indubitable. He found his "epistemic bedrock" in the postulation of the thinking self. He states, "Although the utility of so extensive a doubt is not readily apparent,

nevertheless its greatest utility lies in freeing us of all prejudices, in preparing the easiest way for us to withdraw the mind from the senses, and finally, in making it impossible for us to doubt any further those things that we later discover to be true.”<sup>16</sup> Ultimately the self, the man, for Descartes, was located in the mental, not the soul/matter complex.

Descartian Rationalism, interesting as it is, is ultimately critically fallacious. Ghallager, in his book on Epistemology, makes this point clearly. Ghallager criticizes the phrase “X is in my mind” on the grounds that it views the mind as a container. His position is, essentially, that the mind (and the self) cannot be defined apart from it’s being-in-the-world. As a being, amongst other beings accessible to my perception, the self is defined at all. What is the self except in relation to the non-self? And what is mind apart from it’s relation to that which is understood at all? And what is it apart from it’s distinction from other beings? Thus the point of departure in Philosophy is not the indubitable mind, but being-in-the-world. Through the assumption of being-in-the-world, the mind is justified as a definable category at all. Within Cartesianism, the mind isn’t even definable because there is nothing to define it against if it alone exists in relation to nothing else certain.<sup>17</sup>

### *Lockean Empiricism*

Locke’s Epistemic system is to posit that “all ideas come from sensation or reflection.”<sup>18</sup> Unlike Plato and other rationalists who would say that ideas are clear and distinct in the mind, Locke, along with Aristotle and Thomas, would say that all ideas are known through

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<sup>16</sup> Descartes, Rene. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Quoted from, *Late Modern Philosophy: Essential Readings with Commentary*, Blackwell Publishing, 2007, Pg. 39.

<sup>17</sup> Ghallager, Kenneth T. *The Philosophy of Knowledge*. Fordham University Press, New York. 1982. Pgs. 44-67.

<sup>18</sup> Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. In, *Modern Philosophy: An Anthology of Primary Sources*, Second Edition. Hackett Publishing Company Indianapolis/Cambridge. Pg 323.

sense-experience. For Locke, there are ideas of sensation (the immediate deliverance of the senses, in the moment that the subject is using them) and reflection (the memory working with the contents of sensation).

From the inner-working of sensation, memory, and reflection, the subject who is capable of receiving sensible sensations can compose and divide simple ideas and their aspects into innovative ideas. These innovative ideas, though, originate only in sense perception. From this sensation, Locke develops his theory of primary and secondary qualities. Primary qualities are said to inhere within the substance regardless of our perception (they are real, things like solidity, extension, and mass). Whereas secondary qualities are said to cohere within the subject in relation to the object (secondary qualities; taste, touch, and smell).<sup>19</sup>

Locke's system is, in and of itself, intuitively compelling for the contemporary American man. It presents to him a real world which he is capable of being in contact with. It doesn't have the abstractness of Plato, it is more real. Yet, ultimately, it is philosophically unjustified. The distinction between primary substance and secondary substance is liable to error. From what rational foundation is the individual to distinguish between the two? How can a person move from reality to me, to reality? The subjectivity of Locke's system and the impossibility of sense-perception to be "measured" by anything else other than sense-perception is at best circular and at worst dogmatic. In failing to appeal to the Thomistic doctrines of real and exemplary forms, the theory ultimately fails to "give a reason" for its truthfulness. It fails to be critical and thus ends up in skepticism.

### *Kantianism*

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<sup>19</sup> Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. In, *Modern Philosophy: An Anthology of Primary Sources*. Pgs. 333-334.

Kant understood the problem with Locke's Philosophy well. He understood that Lockean Empiricism cannot traverse the appearance/reality problem. There is, for Kant, an insurmountable wall between the thing in and of it self (the noumena) and the thing as it appears to us (the phenomena). Thus Kant's answer to the problem of Empirical Skepticism is to posit an epistemic system wherein "concurrency" is located within the consciously experiencing mind coming to know it's own subconsciously imposed categories. These categories are the transcendental norms necessary to "organize" sensible experience at all. Ask yourself, what would it take in order to posit that a cup is in front of me? It would take time, space, and logic for starters. Yet where do these sensible qualities come from? Empiricist's would say externality, but Kant would argue that such a statement could only lead to Skepticism. If it inheres in the world, then how can the subject ever distinguish between reality as such and reality to me? Kant then, with his "copernican revolution" in epistemology, posited that the transcendental grounds of the "concurrency" is essentially from the subject. That which the mind learns, in experience, is nothing more than the sum relation of subject and object (appearance). The normatives of which are discovered through ascertaining the transcendental foundation which would be necessary to predicate statements at all. Kant's system is, essentially, rationalistic, even though knowledge for him begins in experience. That experience, though, is not of the external world as such (Locke), nor is it the internal world as such (Descartes), rather it is the sum compilation of the subject in relation to the object.

### *Critical Realism and Thomistic Epistemology*

At this point, it is necessary to respond to Kant. Is a "critical realism" a realism which posits the possibility of "grounding" it's belief in the subject's interaction with the real, external

world possible? Thus what follows is part deconstructive and part constructive in order to deduce a critical realist position.

West notes the debate between Gilson, Maritain, and Garrigou Lagrange on the possibility of a Critical Realist position. He notes how, for Gilson, Realism (the metaphysical correlate to empiricism) and Idealism (the metaphysical correlate to rationalism), are two consistent systems which are entered into not by rationale (justification) but by will (volition). He therefore rejects any notion of a “critical” or justified realism.<sup>20</sup>

Maritain and Lagrange, contrarily, maintain that critical realism is possible when considered transcendently and necessarily. Transcendently, that is, pertaining to foundations, Idealism is impossible. Idealism, specifically Kantian Idealism, posits that the law of non-contradiction is a law of thought, not of being. If it were a law of being, not of thought, and man were a part of the greater “being” endowed the rational concurrency, then Idealism wouldn’t be necessary because man would have direct contact with reality through his rationally endowed substantial form.

Yet, if it is maintained that the thought life is the “rational life” and there is a distinction between the phenomenal realm of sense perception (wherein rationality holds) and the noumenal realm (where rationality doesn’t hold), then from whence comes our knowledge of the existence of the noumenal realm?<sup>21</sup> From whence comes the ability to posit the existence of a noumenal realm at all? It is, if not under the law of non-contradiction, unable to be existent at all in any real sense. Thus Idealism is untenable.

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<sup>20</sup> West, Jason. *Gilson, Maritain and Garrigou-Lagrange on the Possibility of Critical Realism*. In *Maritain Studies*, 2001. Pgs. 50-54.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 57-64

Whereas for a Realist system, which begins in the experience of being and then distinguishes existential and personal being from externality, the implicit “realness” of both the internal and the external world is maintained. It is not so much a question of whether there is anything “underneath” reality. Whether there is “another world.” It is simply the fact that the world under our perception, by definition, exists. The manner of its existence, within the broader contours of Thomas’s Philosophy, is that it is the world as created by God. Thus it is the exact world he wanted to be under our perception. It exists for us.<sup>22</sup>

### **Conclusion - The Deliverance of Thomistic Realism**

The deliverance of the Thomistic system is, philosophically speaking, at-least three-fold: (1) existentially and interpersonally it grounds the real interaction of human beings with one another in a dignified way. Kantianism, Cartesianism, Empiricism, and Materialism all either deny the interpersonality of experience or the certitude of that experience. Thomistic Realism posits that the subject, as a human, comes into contact with other humans whom he can recognize as bearing the substantial form human with dignity, rights, and duties. (2) Epistemologically, Thomistic-Realism procures any real form of logic; the person-in-relation to the world in Thomism is one equipped, by God, with rationality. It thus follows that on Thomistic preconditions (Metaphysical Realism and Epistemological Empiricism), the higher forms of science are possible (the divine science, for example). (3) Finally, scientifically, Thomistic-Empiricism grounds knowledge of the cosmos attained by the senses which was denied by Plato.

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<sup>22</sup> West, Jason. *Gilson, Maritain and Garrigou-Lagrange on the Possibility of Critical Realism*. Pgs 64-69.

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