

## An Aquinas for Our Times

In *Characters in Search of Their Author*, the 1999-2000 *Gifford Lectures* (Glasgow), Ralph McInerny has effortlessly achieved what otherwise seems so difficult for philosophers in our time, excellent philosophy that is a joy to read. This is a work of philosophy that any educated person can read and profit from. It is a sad commentary on the state of contemporary philosophy that those of us engaged in it often think that philosophical substance and beauty of style are in a zero sum game. We appreciate clear writing, but oddly we think that if we enjoy it too much there must be something wrong with it. If any educated person can read it, we suspect its philosophical substance. (We are the exemplar form of what C. S. Lewis critically called “the inner circle.”) But these judgments of style in evaluating the soundness of arguments, positively or negatively, are mistaken. We should know better; we are trained to identify the truth of premises and the validity of argument with an eye toward evaluating soundness. However, if we thus know and practice our business well, why would we object that our spouses might understand what we do?

By the clarity of his prose, McInerny has chosen to enact one of the major themes of the work, namely, that a proof, however formal and substantive, is directed to the antecedent conditions, epistemological and moral, of the hearer or reader. A proof must be evaluated according to the two criteria mentioned above, the truth of its premises, and the validity of its argumentative form. Nonetheless there are virtues, both moral and epistemological, required in one who would set out to wield these instruments well. The oedipal complex of modern philosophy has made us blind to these conditions, so that with Bertrand Russell we readily assent to the idea that it is *only* the religious believer who is tempted not to follow the argument “wherever it may lead.” Against Russell, one of the most satisfying arguments wielded by McInerny is that antecedent conditions are the *preconditions* of philosophy, not its graveyard. What matters is how we till the soil.

Aquinas knew well the importance of style and clarity in a sound argument when he began the *Summa Theologiae* by explaining that his goal was to address beginners in *sacred theology*, to avoid distracting distinctions, and the multiplication of questions that divert the reader from entering into the sacred inquiry. Where Aquinas’ subject was *sacred theology*, those truths about God that can only be known within the context of God revealing them, McInerny’s topic is *natural theology*, those truths that can be known about God apart from God revealing them. He would invite us into this natural inquiry. So, the play on words—we are all characters in search of our author. What McInerny has done for us is rewrite in a style appropriate to our time the first two great questions of Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae* addressed now to *natural theology*--what it is, its possibility, its method, how it differs from *sacred theology*, and what conditions are necessary in those who would engage in it.

McInerny’s central thesis is that all of us are beginners in *natural theology*, after four centuries of trying to start philosophy by overcoming skepticism. If we have no confidence in knowing the world around us, how could we possibly have any confidence in knowing God? As McInerny argues, contemporary *sacred theologians* should take no

comfort in the failures of modern philosophy, and the presumed impossibility of *natural theology*. The revelation upon which *sacred theology* is seemingly based takes place in the same world that the philosophers have lost. While McNerny is quite clear that *sacred theology* does not rest upon the foundations of *natural theology*, he argues very powerfully that it may well fall with it. Religious believers and non-believers alike now consider the prospect of an objective knowledge that God exists as quaint, naïve, impossible, non-meritorious, and perhaps intellectually vicious. According to McNerny, these are our preconditions, and we had better face up to them. Ironically these preconditions force even him to do an awful lot of epistemological spade work, before attempting late in the work to help us begin to understand the “most manifest” proof from motion for the existence of God. We must reorient ourselves toward the real starting point of philosophy, the world around us in which we find ourselves. But it is epistemological therapy rather than critique.

For all its ease of style, the book is not lacking for numerous arguments-- arguments about the failure of post-modernism to provide space for the *natural* or *sacred theologian*, arguments about the importance of a shared conception of and commitment to truth between the theist and the atheist, about language games and Wittgensteinian fideism, about the epistemology of religious belief, about the proper understanding of theoretical and practical knowledge, about the form of human action, about the failure of subjectivity to provide valid arguments for the existence of God, about the ordinary knowledge presupposed to such specialized disciplines as the natural sciences, philosophy, and theology, arguments in dialogue with Protagoras, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Kant, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Russell, Wittgenstein, and Kolokowski. McNerny is the first to acknowledge that all of these arguments must be judged for truth and validity with an eye towards soundness. But the purpose of his forthright style is to challenge our hubris in thinking that we begin thinking about God, positively or negatively, by thinking about God. Perhaps the final virtue of McNerny’s clarity and ease of style in these arguments is that he provides the best roadmap for those who would refute him, if they can.

*Characters* is on the whole the best piece of philosophical writing I have read in several years. Readers familiar with the works of Josef Pieper will know the high praise I pay McNerny when I say that his prose is the equal of anything I have read by Pieper. But where Pieper is an extraordinary font of philosophical insight, McNerny surpasses him here for sheer sustained substance. This is the work of a wise man. It would be silly of me to try to summarize, more than I already have, a work of such substance, clarity, and graceful style. Read it.

John P. O’Callaghan  
Formerly of Creighton  
University,  
Now of The University of

Portland.