

Six Ways Theology Uses Philosophy

David Foster, Ph.D.

Note: This paper was first presented in Venice, April, 1996 at the International Conference on Preparation for Priesthood with the support of the Wethersfield Institute.

The Context

Since I teach philosophy to seminarians, the question which is often raised is “how is philosophy used by theology?” My answers, at first, did not move past the generalities that philosophy is the instrument of theology or that philosophy taught you to think logically. Realizing the inadequacy of those answers, I began to study the relationship.

As a result, this paper aims to describe in better¹ detail how theology uses philosophy. Its main contributions are 1) a description of the instrumental uses of philosophy, 2) the identification of the intrinsic role of philosophy as material to theology.

Because of the focus on the theological uses of philosophy, I will leave aside other contributions of philosophy to theology students, such as, helping them to understand the modern world, disciplining their thinking, stimulating creative thought, and providing order for a complex world. These contributions of philosophy are important, but are not unique to theology.

The Traditional Ways Theology Uses Philosophy

Four main uses quickly emerged as a working hypothesis: philosophy serves theology as a preamble, a tool, a bridge, and a shield.² These are the more traditional ways of describing how theology uses philosophy. The list eventually grew to six.

Philosophy is a preamble in that it prepares people for understanding the Faith. It is a tool in that it is used as an instrument to better understand the Faith. It is a bridge in that it provides common principles where believer and nonbeliever can meet. It is a shield in that it can be used to defend the Faith against arguments of nonbelievers³. The second use, as a tool, is the most common and the most important to articulate for theology students.

As a Preamble

St. Thomas says “the existence of God and other



like truths about God, which can be known by natural reason, are not articles of faith, but are preambles to the articles; for faith presupposes natural knowledge, even as grace presupposes nature."⁴ Philosophy is a preamble to theology by refining concepts such as God, soul, substance, person, nature, justice, evil, and good. When St. Paul begins to preach to the Greeks, he can build on the considerable reflection they had given to each of the ideas just mentioned. In Acts 17 Luke tells us that Paul had been disputing with the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in Athens (v.18). Later when he is invited to address the Athenians in the Areopagus, Paul quotes the third century stoic poet, Aratus. The scene shows St. Paul putting a philosophical preamble to apologetic use.

They were to seek God, yes to grope for him and perhaps eventually to find him - though he is not really far from any one of us. "In Him we live and move and have our being" as some of your own poets have put it, "for we too are His offspring." If we are in fact God's offspring, we ought not to think of divinity as something like a statue of gold or silver or stone, a product of man's genius and his art. Acts 17:27-29.

Philosophy is a natural preamble to faith and the chosen preamble to the better understanding of faith. It is partly for this reason that seminarians study philosophy first. For seminarians, philosophy is not a preamble to their faith, but to their better understanding of the faith. Maritain suggests that God prepared for the gospel by making the Greeks the chosen people of reason, just as He had by making the Jews the chosen people of faith.⁵ If so, then even God uses philosophy as a preamble to theology.

As an Instrument

Theology uses philosophy as an instrument to explain and thus develop the deposit of faith. The development is organic; philosophy does not add to revelation but helps it to flower. St. Thomas has this

use in mind when he speaks of philosophy as the handmaid or servant of theology. It is the most common way that philosophy serves theology and the one most in need of explanation. I will return to this use later.

As a Bridge

Philosophy, as the reflective articulation of the common questions and experience of mankind, naturally provides a common spot where believer and non-believer can meet (a bridge, as it were). Among those common principles are the following: the special dignity of the human person and the recognition of rights, as in the UN Declaration of Human Rights; that no man is an island and the complementary principle that everyone is a unique individual; that we have a natural moral knowledge that judges generosity as good and murder as evil; and that the reason for human action is happiness. Add to this that none of us are ever completely satisfied with our happiness and we have common ground to begin a discussion of God and the things of God.

This philosophical bridge can also help the non-believer cross over to faith as in the case of the young St. Augustine who, like many others, was troubled by the reality of evil. It was a Neoplatonic insight that evil is a privation that helped him overcome the contradiction between a loving God and the reality of evil.

In 1879 *Aeterni Patris* stressed philosophy's use in defense of the faith. In the present day, however, the use as a bridge is more prominent. The outstanding example is Vatican II's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. Addressed to all humanity, it justifies this address with extended discussion of the common hopes and fears of all people.

It would be academic myopia to think that good philosophy rather than the face of Christ won hearts, but philosophy does have its roll to play in the New Evangelization called for by the Holy Father. Its roll

is partly as a common starting point as witnessed by St. Paul's use of the Stoic Poet (cited above) and the Pope's recent book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*.

As a Shield

The use of philosophy to defend the faith is clear in the tradition. Due to the nature of the times, the encyclical of Leo XIII, *Aeterni Patris*, stresses this use of philosophy. Speaking of Greek philosophy, Leo quotes this statement by Clement of Alexandria: "though it does not by its approach make the truth more powerful, it has yet been called a fit hedge and ditch for the vineyard, because it weakens the arguments of sophists against the truth, and wards off the crafty tricks of those by whom the truth is attacked."⁶

St. Thomas says that if someone does not accept the authority of Scripture then one can still show by reason that nothing of the faith is contrary to reason.⁷ The *Summa Contra Gentiles* is an extended example of philosophy being used to defend the Faith.

Both the uses as a shield and as a bridge have an apologetic character as both are directed to the nonbeliever. As noted, Vatican II emphasizes philosophy as a bridge to all mankind. Philosophy still functions as a defense against attack, but when the attack is not argument but slander, philosophy is not the best defense. When the wound is self-inflicted, the ~~medicine~~ ^{remedy} is not philosophy but penance.

Further Exploration

Mapping the Use of Philosophy

I thought of my effort to find the different uses

of philosophy by theology as something akin to mapping. This simply means that I read through theological works from the various periods (being sure to include the various types of works), all the while noting where a use of philosophy was found and what its characteristics were. In doing so, I identified two common uses which I had not yet articulated.

Material Use

As the mapping proceeded, I noticed a category that I had not listed nor heard discussed, i.e., that philosophical terms were sometimes the *matter* in which theology expressed itself.⁸ Once considered, philosophy as material to theology seemed rather obvious and logically linked to philosophy's use as a preamble. Those same refined understandings of man and the world that are a preamble to the faith are then used by theologians to express the mysteries of faith. Theology presupposes philosophy, as faith presupposes common sense understanding. There is no break or even radical shift, but rather the slow refinement of our common understandings.

Just as the Gospel presupposes the common understandings in which it will express itself; so theology presupposes philosophy, which refines and defends these common understandings. The images of farmers, fishermen, and shepherds have conveyed the Gospel from its first preaching by Jesus of Nazareth until the present day. These images have done so with a simplicity, clarity, and profundity that reflect their Divine origin. These images are like sturdy but soft lumber; they are good for framing, they support the bold truth, but they are not meant for detailed carving.

As the Church preaches, explains, and defends

*Anytime a philosophy
has a true insight
into the nature of the
world and the human
condition, it can be of
use to theology.*

the Gospel, it is able to use (sometimes forced to use) philosophically refined understandings of man and the world. These understandings are like hard wood that is able to receive the detailed work of the carpenter's chisel.

If it is true that philosophical terms are material as well as instrumental for theology, then it should be evident by this difference: the material use should remain in the theological statement, whereas the instrumental use remains only in the background or, so to speak, on the shelf. This is because material cause is intrinsic to something; whereas instrumental cause, which is a type of efficient cause, is always other than the thing itself.

This does happen as, for example, when the question is asked, "How can we be free in heaven if we are not able to sin?". The answer comes in part from a better understanding of freedom, one that shows that the slavery of sin has nothing to do with freedom, and that the freedom to be ourselves has nothing to do with sin. Insofar as philosophy has given us a better understanding of freedom, it is now incorporated as the matter in which the faith is expressed. Thus, it remains.

Other examples of philosophy being material for theology could be terms such as substance, nature, and person. Substance (*ousia* in Greek), which has a rich tradition in ancient philosophy, is given a technical sense by the Church in compounds such as *homoousios*, which is used by the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.) to express the Son's complete equality with the Father, or transubstantiation, which is adopted by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215 A.D.) to express the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. *Homoousios* was not found in the Scriptures but was consciously chosen to clarify the meaning of the Scriptures.⁹ It remains in our Creed.

An example of the instrumental use of philosophy will show that, unlike a material use, instrumental use is extrinsic to the theological statement. Com-

parisons are often used as theological tools, and by a tool's nature once its work is done it is set apart. Peter Kreeft makes the following comparison to explain why we are not able to grasp the reason for the existence of evil: just as we cannot communicate all we know to animals, so God cannot communicate all He knows to us.¹⁰ Just as we cannot explain to our dog why he must get a rabies shot, so the full reality of God's world cannot be explained to us. Once this idea is grasped, the homely image can be dropped and we are left with an inkling of how much the reality of God escapes our grasp. Other examples include distinctions such as substance and accident or the analogical use of a term. Once we understand how the analogical use of language allows us to use terms in reference to God without limiting God, then the reference to the tool fades and we continue to speak about the knowledge and love of God.

Systematic Use

There is another use, akin to instrumental use, yet different enough to deserve its own category.¹¹ It occurs when an entire philosophical system is adopted to provide a perspective from which to systematically do theology. It is perhaps the most often referred-to use nowadays because this is the use meant when one speaks of "pluralism" in philosophy. I do not know of a name for this use; I will call it the *systematic use* of philosophy.

In comparison with the instrumental use, this use is more like a workbench than a tool. It is the use of a metaphysics to provide a perspective and a consistent approach to answering the theological questions. Like a workbench it provides the level- surface area (horizon) of the theology being done; it puts the system in systematic theology.

Anytime a philosophy has a true insight into the nature of the world and the human condition, it can be of use to theology. Occasionally there comes a radically new insight that opens up reality for philoso-

phers the way aerial photography and then satellite photography opened new possibilities for map makers.

Although this has long been the case (e.g., Augustine's personal discovery of Neoplatonism), it is especially in modern times that such new perspectives have been sought out. Some examples are: Kantian philosophy, Hegelianism, Marxist theory, phenomenology, existentialism, process thought, and feminist philosophy. While philosophy is legitimately a source of new insights, there is a high risk of distorting the Gospel. This effect is evident in history. Some distortion is caused by the Neoplatonism of Origen, the Averroism of Siger of Brabant, as well as by the process philosophy of some contemporary theologians.

The current advocacy of pluralism in philosophy (and, therefore, also in theology) contains a trap about which new theologians should be warned. The pluralism which is appropriate to philosophy and which finds support in the documents of Vatican II is not based on the impossibility of truth but the impossible richness of truth. Legitimate pluralism stems from the depth of being that is never exhausted by our researches. We will never say all there is about love or friendship, but it is true to say that we need friends. The richness of being always leaves us with something more to explore. Our human nature makes misunderstanding possible but does not make understanding impossible.

On the other hand, I warn seminarians about a pluralism based on the postmodern critique. Postmoderns call naive any claim for transhistorical truth, such as to profess the same faith as did our fathers. This is so because there is no "foundation" upon which such knowledge can be based. Those

who seek a foundation are naive or frightened or scheming to keep others in subjection. The valuable insights of the postmoderns regarding the effect of historical context, the impact of culture and language, and the subjective aspect of all our knowing, should chasten our theology. Yet, the hidden premises of the postmodern philosophers about God and man, lead them to extreme conclusions and show them not to be postmodern but ultramodern. They felt themselves post modern because they no longer sought a foundation for knowledge as had Descartes, Locke, Kant, etc.. They show themselves, however, the children of modern thought by accepting the modern reductions of God to man, of man to beast, and of knowledge to sensation. Given these assumptions their denial of objective truth is ^{the} inevitable outcome of modern philosophy.

To sum up, the two characteristics of the systematic use of philosophy (which provides a workbench as it were) are: 1) it uses a metaphysical system to provide a certain perspective for theology, 2) it provides the principles for a consistent set of answers to theological questions. The Scriptures, however, are not neutral in regard to certain metaphysical positions and it is the job of the theologian to use one that is compatible with the Gospel and the job of the magisterium to ultimately judge this.

Detailing the Instrumental Use

The most common way for theologians to describe their use of philosophy is as an instrument. It is found, among others, in Rahner, Lonergan, Aquinas, Maritain, and in Church documents like *Aeterni Patris*. Of the six uses of philosophy as preamble, instrument, bridge, shield, material, and system, the complexities of the instrumental use are most important

*Legitimate pluralism
stems from the depth
of being that is never
exhausted by our
researches.*

to articulate for the new theologian.

One way to clarify the instrumental use is to review the specific tools used by Thomas Aquinas.

Thomas' Philosophical Tool Box

Thomas' *Principles of Nature* is a short work (six chapters), done during his student days in Paris (1252 - 1256), about the same time as *On Being and Essence*. Thomas probably composed the work as a primer for his fellow students on the fundamentals of Aristotle's metaphysics. I think it is aptly described as Thomas' tool box and to review it is to view the philosophical distinctions most often used by Aquinas. It is a good introduction to the philosophy he uses in the *Summa Theologiae*. Appended to this paper is a brief description of main topics in each chapter with a note on how Thomas will use them in theology. You are invited to view these familiar items as possible tools for theology.

A Contemporary List of Philosophical Tools

Another way to clarify the instrumental use is to make a list of the different types. The following is my list of seven types (categories) of philosophical tools.

1. *Distinctions*: The foremost general category is the host of distinctions that reveal being by properly dividing it. Distinctions such as between the modes of being, between person and nature, or between act and potency have all served theologians well. These are particular instances of the next category.

2. *Metaphysical Structure*: Philosophy attempts to describe the most fundamental structure of all being. Put another way, philosophy describes the characteristics common to all being save God. The most successful of these efforts is still Aristotle's, i.e., his metaphysical insight that all being has four causes. The causes reveal both the internal structure of being and its most important relations.

3. *Rational Order*: Rational order is the order that puts doctrine in a clear format. It is evident in the contrast between the order of a catechism or creed and the historical order of the Bible.

4. *Logic*: Logic allows for the application of revealed principles to new situations. It further provides some, but not all, of the logic for theological argumentation.

5. *Analogies*: Analogies are a common and effective tool of explanation. The parables and allegories used by Jesus in the gospel are a type of analogy. There are also important differences which are not easily distinguished. Philosophy categorizes and explains the different types of analogy.

6. *Analogical Terms*: Not every analogy uses a term analogically. It is the use of a term such as "knowing" with diverse but related meanings that allows us to predicate it of both man and God meaningfully and without equivocation.

7. *Models*: A model, a type of large scale analogy, can both explain and spur theological insight. For example, Avery Dulles, in his well-known book on the Church¹², lists five models for the Church: institution, mystical communion, sacrament, Herald, and servant. Each model then serves as a guide to answering the fundamental questions about the Church. As with analogies and analogical terms, philosophy can supply not only the tool but also the explanation of how the tool works.

As in most tool boxes there are other items to be sorted out. There are new insights that arise for theological consideration, such as those from phenomenology. Natural law theory helps us understand the harmony between what Sacred Scripture commands and the natural good for the human person. The recognition of the harmony between nature and

grace is, in part, philosophical. Finally, there are the special metaphors, analogies, and contrasts that help clarify. Like most tool boxes, our box still contains things whose origin and use are mysterious.

Conclusion

I have suggested that the relationship between philosophy and theology has often been poorly understood. A fuller description of this relationship would help students understand the theological tradition and do theology better in the present. As a start to a better articulation, I suggest theology uses philosophy in six ways.

1. It prepares students for theology by seeking the answers to the fundamental questions of origin, nature, and destiny, and by refining concepts such as soul, justice, good, and even God.

2. It provides common ground for discussion between believers and nonbelievers.

3. It can be used to defend the Gospel, especially with those who do not accept Scripture.

4. It can articulate the set of underlying assumptions and provide a new perspective for doing theology.

5. It provides concepts that are material for theological explanations.

6. It provides a host of distinctions, analogies, and concepts that are instruments for doing theology.

Theology students need a clear expression of how philosophy can serve them. Thus, I have suggested it will serve them ^{as} a preamble, a bridge, a shield, and a workbench; but most of all (materially) as the fine hard wood in which to incarnate the Word and (instrumentally) as the tool with which to carve the Word. †

Dr. David Foster is a Professor of Philosophy at Seton Hall University, South Orange, New Jersey.

Notes

¹ In my experience those who speculate on this question concentrate on the general relationship without considering the specifics.

² Both the *Summa* and *Aeterni Patris* give something very similar.

³ This assumes the attacks are reasoned arguments, not slanders.

⁴ *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 2, a.2, ab.1

⁵ Jacques Maritain, *An Introduction to Philosophy*, trans. by E. I. Watkin (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1962), p. 19.

⁶ The citation can be found in the text of *Aeterni Patris* printed as a forward to Benziger Edition of the *Summa Theologiae*, Vol. 1, p. ix.

⁷ *Summa Theologiae* I, q.1, a.8.

⁸ I am using here the categories of Aristotle's basic metaphysical insight, that all being, save God, has four funda-

mental characteristics of unity-continuity, multiplicity-uniqueness, contingency-dependence, and purpose-intelligibility. It is the particular actualization of these four aspects that needs to be understood in order to know something. These are commonly referred to as the four causes: material, formal, efficient, and final.

⁹ The Church's choice of *homoousios* seems to have depended on the ordinary and common use of the term and not on any already established technical sense.

¹⁰ Peter Kreeft, *Fundamentals of the Faith*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988) p.57.

¹¹ It is akin to the instrumental use in that it seems to be the philosophical tools taken collectively as part of a consistent metaphysics.

¹² Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, Doubleday & Company, Garden City, New York, 1974.

¹³ See, for example, *Summa Theologiae* I, q.66, aa. 1 and 4.

Appendix

Thomas' *Principles of Nature* By Chapters

Chapter 1 opens with the distinction between act and potency. This is the fundamental distinction for Thomas because it describes the difference between God, who is pure act, and everything else, which always has some aspect of potency. Next is the distinction between substance and accidents that describes the two fundamentally different ways we experience things as either existing in themselves or existing in another. This also provides the distinction between changes wherein something changes without becoming other than itself (accidental change) and changes where one thing ceases to be and another is generated (substantial change). Thomas repeatedly uses these basic distinctions in the *Summa Theologiae*.

Chapter 2 describes matter, form and privation. These are Aristotle's *principles of nature* because nature is that which has an inner principle of change and these are the principles needed to explain change as difference and continuity rather than either exclusively accidental or annihilation and creation. Thomas uses the intrinsic causes of matter and form to describe the relation between body and soul; he uses privation to describe the nature of evil.

Chapter 3 completes the set of essential causes by showing that besides material and formal causes there is need for an efficient cause that initiates the action and a final cause that is the reason why the efficient cause begins to act. That agents (efficient causes) act only for an end is easier to see in voluntary agents, but Thomas must explain how this also applies to natural agents, which do not deliberate but are directed to an end by a nature given them by the first efficient cause. For Thomas, the whole world finds its efficient and final cause in God.

Chapter 4 explores relations among causes, e.g., types of priority, how causes are causes to one another, and how the final cause is the cause of causes.

Something can be first or claim priority either in generation and time or in substance and completeness. The boy is prior to the man in generation and time; likewise, the imperfect is prior to the perfect and potency is prior to act (agent and material cause are prior in this sense). But according to substance or completeness the man is prior to the boy; likewise, the perfect is prior to the imperfect and act prior to potency (formal and final cause are prior in this sense). You would be surprised how often Thomas uses this distinction to settle a dispute between two things that are both said to be first.¹³

Chapter 5 presents the order in causes of the same type. Each of the four causes can be considered from the particular to the more universal actualization, which is to say, from the proximate to the universal. For example, the efficient cause of an animal considered as proximate is his parents, the intermediate efficient cause is, perhaps, Mother Nature, and the ultimate is God. Thomas uses this to explain the secondary but real causality that human beings often exercise.

Chapter 6 discusses degrees of sameness and difference among things, noting that their causes are similar and diverse accordingly. Thomas gives four degrees of sameness starting with the identical and moving toward greater diversity. Thus there is: a) numerical sameness, as when the same thing is spoken of and pointed to; b) specific sameness, as when two persons are compared as human beings; c) generic sameness, as when horse and dog are compared as animals; d) analogical sameness, as when the term healthy is said of man and medicine. The analogical use of a term, which allows a wide degree of difference while being in some respect alike, is, of course, crucial to Thomas' explanation of how we can talk meaningfully about God.