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Grammatical Thomism – An Introduction

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Abstract: In this short introductory article the guest editors discuss the reason for this special issue on Grammatical Thomism. Both parts of 'grammatical thomism' receive conceptual clarification. Issues arising out of this are addressed, and a case is made for the ongoing relevance of the grammatical thomist tradition.

Key words: grammatical Thomism, Herbert McCabe, David Burrell, Brian Davies, Wittgenstein, thomism

Why a special issue on *grammatical* thomism? Books and journal articles on *thomism* abound. What is it about the largely anglophone[1] phenomenon that is grammatical thomism that warrants particular attention? We think that this broad tradition contains much of enduring philosophical and theological value, speaking as it does to historical debates whilst opening up new questions, and new ways of viewing traditional material, of its own. As is evident in this volume, grammatical thomism remains a living tradition; new work is being done within that tradition, and increasingly scholars are taking a biographical or historical interest in key figures within grammatical thomism. This special issue is, then, timely.

Timely, perhaps, but is it wise? It might be thought that the use of the expression 'grammatical thomism' to refer to an array of thinkers – including, paradigmatically, Herbert McCabe, David Burrell and Brian Davies – is a mistake. There are (at least) two reasons one might think this. First of all: the expression was coined by Francesca Murphy, in her *God Is Not a Story*,[2] in order to critique the movement she believed the expression to pick out. According to Murphy the grammatical thomists are guilty of a kind of linguistic idealism, leading theology away from the kind of realist metaphysics required to underwrite it adequately, and representing therefore a retrograde step in philosophically-informed theology. Why, the question could be posed, should we use a term coined by an opponent of the thinkers usually termed grammatical thomist to refer to those thinkers? Might the term not have implications which misrepresent those thinkers? Might its use not, moreover, suggest that these thinkers constitute more of an homogenous movement than is in fact the case?

Secondly: the label 'grammatical thomist' has been rejected by one of the very thinkers often thought to fall under that label, namely Fergus Kerr. In a *New Blackfriars* editorial, Kerr objected in particular to the use of the term of Herbert McCabe.[3] For Kerr, the usage over-emphasises the indebtedness of McCabe's thought to Wittgenstein, whilst simultaneously underplaying the influence of the thomism of Victor White. Kerr is particularly concerned with McCabe's apophatic conception

of God, which he thinks it is a mistake to trace back to Wittgenstein, and which, according to Kerr, is better viewed as continuous with an identifiable English Dominican tradition.

Kerr is largely right. Whilst there is an intriguing mysticism in the early Wittgenstein, which McCabe is not above quoting – 'it is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists'[4] – it is undoubtedly the case that McCabe receives from White a tradition of reading Thomas Aquinas as an apophatic theologian. This does not, however, militate against the usefulness of the designator 'grammatical thomism'. McCabe and others do make substantial use of Wittgenstein, even if that use relates more to theological methodology, with the doctrinal content of their theology being drawn from elsewhere, especially from Thomas Aquinas.

The worry about allowing an opponent, Francesca Murphy, to label grammatical thomism is in a way less straightforward to answer. We think that it is best shown that there is a genuine, albeit broad and vaguely demarcated, movement answering to that name by actually working with that movement, and demonstrating that such work can be productive. That they do this is part of the value of the papers collected in this special issue. In what remains of this introduction, we will describe the grammatical thomist tradition as we understand it, hoping that this too will contribute to demonstrating that a productive understanding of the tradition can be developed which situates the grammatical thomists within the wider philosophical and theological terrain.

How is grammatical Thomism *grammatical*?

Whatever else grammatical thomism might be, it must surely be a movement deserving of the adjective 'grammatical'. The use of that word is to signify a connection with linguistic philosophy, and in particular with Wittgenstein. In his *Philosophical Investigations*, we find a cryptic remark,

> Grammar tells us what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar). (PI 373)[5]

Grammar here is to be understood as wider than simply rules governing the correct composition of sentences. Rather, for Wittgenstein, grammar concerns itself with linguistic usage as a whole, and in particular with the rules and norms governing the use of linguistic expressions. The point of PI 373, then, is that in order to address questions about the nature of entities we should attend to the language we use in speaking about those entities. In particular, as Wittgenstein's parenthetical remark conveys, in order to enquire after God we should look at the grammar of God-talk. The role of theology is to trace that grammar.

There are, for grammatical Thomism, problems here. After all, according to the grammatical thomists we cannot – *contra* Wittgenstein's implication – know 'what kind of object' God is, since God is neither a member of a kind nor an object. We will touch more upon this below. Nevertheless, for all that the grammatical thomists subject themselves to apophatic strictures not obviously contained in Wittgenstein's later writing, they are entirely in agreement with him about the importance of paying attention to the use of words. This is most immediately apparent in David Burrell's writing, where appeal is made to the concept of grammar in delineating what we may and may not say concerning God. More generally, however, the grammatical thomist thought is that, by elucidating our use of the word 'God', and in particular by looking at the conditions under which we might introduce this word to our language, we can make theological progress. In fact, the grammatical thomist move here is in the direction of a distinctively negative theology. Precisely through looking at the introduction and use of the word 'God', runs the claim, we can come to see that there are a series of things that

cannot be said about whatever that word designates, a series of questions which it doesn't make sense to ask of God.

If grammatical investigations into the word 'God' feature most prominently in the grammatical thomist's output other expressions are also made the object of grammatical enquiry. Prominent here is McCabe's treatment of the word 'love' in *Law, Love and Language*[6]. 'Love', notes McCabe, can develop in its usage, but there must be some rules governing its usage or else it would be meaningless. His target here are the situation ethicists, who seem to deny that the usage of love is constrained by *any* rules or use and thereby, at McCabe's hand, fall victim to something recognisably similar to Wittgenstein's private language argument. The Wittgensteinian association of linguistic meaning with use remains in the background throughout.

Wittgenstein, as Fergus Kerr has observed at length,[7] was a resolute opponent of mind-body dualism. We are, on the Wittgensteinian understanding, intrinsically users of public languages, symbol-using creatures whose capacity to think and to be alongside others is tied up with our animality. This anti-dualism is taken on board by the grammatical thomists, and brought into conversation with philosophical currents dating back to before Descartes' fateful advocacy of mind-body dualism.[8] Chief amongst these currents, of course, is that issuing from Thomas Aquinas. In the thought of McCabe, as also for Kerr, the Aristotelian-thomist understanding of the human person as a rational animal is given a linguistic explication – we are *linguistic* animals. Here both adjective and noun should be taken seriously. We are not basically spiritual beings, accidentally trapped in a body. But nor are we simply material beings without any means of transcending our bodily individuality. For we have language, and by means of language – itself a thoroughly bodily affair – we can interact intellectually with one another. Thought, *contra* Descartes, is not essentially private, but is rather internally related to the possession and use of a shared language.

How is grammatical thomism *thomist*?

One way in which grammatical Thomism might be said to be thomist, then, is through its construction of a philosophical anthropology which reads Thomas through a Wittgensteinian lens with anti-dualist effect. In what other ways might the enterprise be said to be thomist?

Here we should proceed with caution. For all that his thought was immersed in Thomas' writings, McCabe explicitly disowned the label 'thomist'.[9] Other grammatical thomists have not positively claimed it for themselves. A large part of what is going on here is a reaction against the manualised neo-scholasticism characteristic of the early part of the 20th century and dominant, in many circles at least, before the Second Vatican Council. Compared to the thought of the grammatical thomists this thought was arid, reducing what should be a living intellectual tradition flowing from Thomas into a static system with no potential to be open to other currents of thought and every likelihood of shutting down enquiry. If this is what thomism consisted in, and for many people (friends and foes of neo-thomism) it was, then the authors we are considering did not want to be thomists.

Rigid stylised thomism has not gone away. The internet is awash with sites claiming the name of Thomas, and putting his ideas – often paraphrased and certainly not propounded through detailed engagement with primary texts – to work in the service of an unflinching conservatism. But the fact is that the word 'thomism' is, for most people familiar with it, synonymous with 'someone thinking in the tradition of Thomas Aquinas'. This being so, it is surely better to attempt to reclaim the word, showing in practice that there are more ways of being a thomist than the narrow ones. Grammatical

thomism is one such way, and we think that it is best to keep on calling it that: 'grammatical *thomism*'.

What is distinctive about the thomism of the grammatical thomists? We've already noted an emphasis on a non-dualistic account of the human person. This philosophical anthropological theme sits alongside a virtue ethics, emphasising that what is good for human beings is to flourish as the kind of animals that we are, and attending to the characteristics of flourishing. For McCabe, echoed here by Kerr, the apex of these characteristics is – as for Thomas – *caritas*. The grammatical thomist gloss is that *caritas* is a virtue characterised by friendship with God and with one another. Friendship then becomes an important locus of grammatical thomist writing, from homilies to political interventions.

If grammatical Thomism appeals to Thomas in its thought about the human person, perhaps more striking is the manner in which it reads Thomas on the question of God. For Burrell, Davies, and McCabe (amongst others),[10] Thomas is to be read as an apophatic thinker. We should, on this account, take with full seriousness the insistence early on in the *Summa Theologiae* that we cannot know what God is, but only what God is not.[11] Indeed, this remark, made by Thomas immediately after he has offered (what he takes to be) demonstrations of the existence of God, becomes a prism through which the rest of the *Summa* is read. Christology and trinitarian theology, for instance, are done in a way that is subject to apophatic strictures. The whole of Christian theology is about the mysterious God who utterly escapes any possible understanding, yet is united to us – as Thomas says – 'as to one unknown'.[12]

The characteristic grammatical thomist move to apophaticism comes through considering the conditions under which the word 'God' is introduced.[13] This word is used to denote whatever it is that answers the question 'why is there something rather than nothing at all?' And, goes the argument, we cannot know what this is. Here a thinker like McCabe basically recapitulates Thomas' series of denials in *STh* Ia, q3, contained under the description 'the doctrine of divine simplicity'.[14] Whatever the answer to our question might be, it cannot (for various reasons)[15] be characterised in the usual ways in which we describe the composite entities of our theorising and experience: God has no parts, God is not a member of a kind, God's existence is not distinct from God's essence, and so on. Now, obviously this move to apophaticism needs more careful philosophical attention and scrutiny than it is possible to give it in this introduction, and there is a lively debate in contemporary philosophy of religion about divine simplicity. It is, however, absolutely criterial for grammatical thomist theology. With respect to apophaticism, authors in this tradition will agree with an earlier thinker of great influence on the tradition, Victor White,

> St Thomas's position differs from that of modern agnostics because while modern agnosticism says simply, 'we do not know, and the universe is a mysterious riddle', a Thomist says, 'We do not know what the answer is, but we do know that there is a mystery behind it all which we do not know, and if there were not there would not even be a riddle. This Unknown we call *God*. If there were no God, there would be no universe to be mysterious, and nobody to be mystified'.[16]

Engagement with other thought

One way in which the grammatical thomist authors resists a kind of thomistic fundamentalism is through open engagement with a range of authors from outside the thomist tradition. This in itself was not unusual in thomist thought in the latter half of the twentieth century. Think, for instance of the transcendental thomism associated with Rahner and Lonergan, which views Thomas through a

Kantian lens. Grammatical thomism is distinguished by the nature and range of its philosophical interlocutors.

Most obviously the conversations the grammatical thomists are engaged with are with Wittgenstein, and we have already mentioned these. However, far more names appear in the grammatical thomist oeuvre than simply those of Thomas and Wittgenstein, and even more are in the background than are explicitly cited in the texts. Here we might make mention of McCabe's engagement with Marx (and his more subtle, but definitely present, recognition of the importance of Freud), Kerr's magisterial treatment of post-Kantian philosophy, and Davies' ongoing conversation with contemporary analytic philosophy.

This openness to thought well beyond the customary thomist canon manifests an intellectual catholicity which shows grammatical thomism to be a healthily living tradition, attentive to new challenges and willing to speak with new conversation partners. The contrast with said thomisms which give the impression that all significant questions have already been answered in the thomistic corpus couldn't be sharper. For the grammatical thomists, Thomas is in ongoing dialogue with the best of contemporary thought.

This matters for the reception of Thomas. He is not well served by being presented as (nearly) the repository of all wisdom. He is a fellow pilgrim on the Christian intellectual journey, albeit a particularly important one. If we exaggerate the extent of his theological authority we both misrepresent him and do him a disservice. Reading him alongside other authors reduces the danger of doing this. It moreover continues a project in which Thomas himself was engaged, marrying the best current thought (as well as, in Thomas' case, the retrieved work of Aristotle) to Christian theology. Grammatical thomism is a fundamentally open thomism; and for that reason, amongst many others, it deserves continued interest.

This Special Issue

Continued interest in grammatical thomism is pleasingly evident. Conferences have been organised on the topic, and a good number of scholars profess an interest in the topic. This special issue is further evidence of the healthiness of ongoing concern with these thinkers. The papers collected here fall into two categories: some are interventions *within* the intellectual tradition of grammatical thomism, others are *about* grammatical thomist authors. In both cases we believe that we have collected here some high quality papers which exhibit grammatical thomism as a living tradition.

Rather than summarise the papers here, we believe that it is best to allow them to speak for themselves. We do, however, wish to comment on one troubling and curious aspect of the collection, namely the highly uneven gender balance amongst our authors. There is no reason grammatical thomism should be a male preserve, and we are strongly of the opinion that serious thinking ought to be devoted to attracting a more diverse range of voices into the conversation about a movement which is, after all, of universal importance.

That importance issues from the topics which animate the grammatical thomists: God and humanity. Speaking in broad terms: theirs is a vision in which the mysterious God, a God beyond our linguistic and cognitive capacities, elevates the human animal to a life of friendship with God. That life fulfils the deepest longings of human beings and, ultimately, the grammatical thomist writings have one overarching object – to communicate in an attractive way the mystery of God and the reality of that life of friendship, in order that others might come to share that life.

Note on the contributors

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Filippo Casati teaches philosophy at Lehigh University and has wide-ranging interests. With a background in logic and the philosophy of Heidegger, he also works on Deleuze, Meinong and Wittgenstein. He is the author of *Heidegger on the Contradiction of Being* and editor (with Daniel O. Dahlstrom) of *Heidegger on Logic*. He is currently co-authoring a book (with Simon Hewitt) on the paradox of divine ineffability.

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Endnotes

[1] An exception which we would class as grammatically thomist is Pouivet, *Après Wittgenstein, Saint Thomas*.
[2] Murphy, *God is not a Story*.
[3] Kerr, *Grammatical Thomism*?

[4] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus,* 6.44.
[5] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 373.
[6] McCabe, *Law, love and language*, pp. 20-2.
[7] Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein*.
[8] This point is made well in Pouivet's *Après Wittgenstein*.
[9] Thanks to Brian Davies for conversations about this. (SH)
[10] A particularly important thinker clearly at least under the influence of grammatical thomism is Denys Turner. See, for instance, his *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God*.
[11] *STh* 1a, q3., pr.
[12] *STh* 1a, q12., a13., ad. 1.
[13] On this see Hewitt, *Grammatical Thomism*.
[14] McCabe, *Creation*.
[15] We take the controlling reason here to be that if God contained any form of composition, then that composition would stand in need of explanation, contradicting the claim that God is self-sufficient and not subject to explanation from outside God, a claim implicit in God's being the reason why there is something rather than nothing at all (*STh* 1a, q3., a7., co.)
[16] White, *God the Unknown*, p. 19.