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Gilson on Philosophy and Civilization

In his paper presented at the Sixth International Congress of Philosophy held at Harvard in 1926, Etienne Gilson interrogated history to determine “the role of philosophy in the history of civilization.”¹

Gilson outlined three general tendencies among historians of philosophy. First, there are those who reduce the history of philosophy to a study of sources and find the explanation of philosophy outside of itself. Gilson cited Herder, Taine, Marx, and Durkheim as representatives who maintain that philosophies are the necessary products of causes in history such as physical or social elements outside of the philosopher. Even the philosopher’s personality remains only a particular effect of those elements. Second, there are those philosophers who try to go beyond the sources of a given philosophy and even beyond the concepts and images in which it is expressed to find the original intuition which generates it. These historians want to surpass the *materials* that com-

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¹ Etienne Gilson, “Le rôle de la philosophie dans l’histoire de la civilisation,” in *Proceedings of the Sixth International Congress of Philosophy*, Harvard, 13–17 September 1926, ed. Edgar Sheffield Brightman (New York: Green and Company, 1927), 529–535.



pose a philosophy and locate its originating intuition. Neither of these first two views of history is irreconcilable with one other.

Nor is a third position that Gilson proposed which is not sensitive to what the social milieu imposes on a philosopher nor to the effort by which the philosopher avoids these constraints. On this view:

Philosophy is above all love of wisdom and there is no wisdom without truth. But truth depends neither on society nor on the creative genius of philosophies; it is simply truth. Of course, no one can pride oneself on possessing truth alone and completely but its content manifests itself little by little, by the age-old effort of researchers who discover it. So whether one considers their historical filiation or their individual structure, the systems of philosophy appear as uniquely conditioned by the necessary relations that link the ideas. Neglecting as accidental all of the historical, social or individual elements that enter into the composition of systems of thought, the history of philosophy so understood retains only their truth value; it is essentially philosophy.²

Whereas history recognizes only philosophies, e.g., that of Plato, Aristotle, St. Thomas and Descartes, Gilson introduced a non-historical concept of philosophy.

Gilson supported his position with two arguments. First, each philosophy appears as the expression and mirror of a civilization, i.e., as regards what the philosopher owes to his period of time and that which his individual genius contributes. But if philosophy has no other function than to bring a clear awareness of itself to each civilization, its scope would not exceed the period of civilization that it expresses. We find, however, that Plato and Aristotle remain relevant to our time. They still have much to say to us because their historical thought contains a timeless element which makes such thinkers perpetually contemporary with all human reason. Socrates's method, Plato's idea, Aris-

² *Ibid.*, 530. All translations are mine.

tote's nature and Bergson's pure duration have their youth guaranteed by the necessity internal to essences that reason thinks which is more immutable than science itself. This non-historical truth of philosophy is higher than that of historical civilizations. Each civilization's worth stems from its participation in that truth which surpasses it; to the extent a civilization participates in the truth, it inscribes a message that time can no longer erase.

Second, regardless of the epoch or form of civilization on which a philosopher depends, he finds himself in the presence of ideas, in the presence of necessary essences whose content escapes his free choice. When one idea appears to a philosopher in the splendor of its truth, the philosopher moves to free and detach it from all that does not pertain to its essence, so much so that Gilson defined all philosophy as "a metaphysical experiment pushed to the limit on the content of one idea" or "nothing other than the universe thought in function of an essence."³ As Gilson elaborated in subsequent works such as *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*⁴ and *Being and Some Philosophers*,⁵ everything occurs as if the history of philosophy, taken as a whole, is that of a vast investigation on the content of human thought—an investigation taken up

³ *Ibid.*, 534, my translation. Gouhier characterized Gilson's pursuit of the impersonal essence of various systems as attaining that which is "de plus essentiellement personnel." Each essence "est liée à une attitude originelle, complexe d'intentions, de réactions et d'idées qui doivent être lentement reconnues; l'histoire du philosophe, celle de ses écrits et celle de son système ne seront dépassées qu'après avoir été poussées le plus loin possible et même il conviendrait que ce dépassement fût un prolongement. L'analyse de M. Gilson vise toujours ce qu'il y a de plus intérieur et, par suite, tend vers ce point où chaque pensée tourne, affronte ou méconnaît ses propres difficultés" (Henri Gouhier, "L'unité de l'expérience philosophique," *La vie intellectuelle* 56 (1938): 404–412, reprinted in Gouhier's *La philosophie et son histoire*, 127–134 [citation from *ibid.*, 129]).

⁴ New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965; first published in 1937; in 1999, reprinted by Ignatius Press (San Francisco), with a "Foreword" by Desmond J. FitzGerald.

⁵ Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952 (second edition), 2016 (corrected and enlarged, reprinted with minor corrections).

unceasingly and unceasingly enlarged, which reveals essences to the intelligence, in defining them. For Gilson, the history of philosophies becomes the history of philosophy. He treats individual philosophies as experiments of reason.

The three different interpretations of the history of philosophy that Gilson outlined correspond to three different views of the role of philosophy in the history of civilization. If philosophies dissolve into elements taken from social milieu, which give birth to them, every philosophy is an ideological expression of a given state of civilization. If, on the other hand, philosophies are original products of creative activity, philosophy no longer results from a civilization, it creates civilization. But if philosophies are expressions of an eternal truth, dominating men and societies, which discovers itself progressively by the mediation of philosophers, philosophy is neither effect nor cause but transcendent with regard to every given state of civilization.

Gilson then asked whether history allows us to determine which of these three interpretations is true, or to what extent each is true. First, history shows philosophies, even those extremely distant from us in time such as Plato's, respond to questions posed by a given state of science and society. No one can interpret St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, without taking into account the integral influences of Aristotle, St. Augustine, and Catholic doctrine on his thought. Similarly, Descartes was influenced by the mathematical physics of his time, the corpuscular philosophy of the 16th century, and by St. Augustine. What is not disputed is the fact that there is not one philosophy that does not have deep roots in the social milieu in which it was born. According to Gilson, "the more powerful, original, the thought that a historian analyzes, the more it reveals itself as receptive and assimilating" which is why "each great philosophy is first of all a belvedere from which we

regard the civilization of which it is the summation.”⁶ But this does not suffice to explain completely philosophy’s genesis. Although philosophy directly represents the civilization it expresses, it is not a result of it. Something more than the elements it borrows from a civilization is required.

Second, supposing that all of the social influences needed for a philosophy are readily available to a philosopher, they are also at the disposition of all others submitted to the same social influences. Yet each philosophy appears as unique and irreducible to any antecedent system. Even a philosophy that repeats the formulas of its predecessors confers a unique sense on them. Consider, for example, the notion of substance as it appears in Aristotle, St. Thomas, Descartes, and Spinoza. The great philosophies may represent their times not only because they gather ideas from them, but also because they try to synthesize them.

The intellectual currents of any epoch do not take form themselves in human minds. Rather, each current affirms itself with such force that it seems incapable of progressing unless it suppresses the others, thereby turning human minds into a place of conflict only able to affirm necessary and contradictory ideas, but not able to reach resolution. This leaves two options: accepting skepticism or the suicide for thought, or waiting patiently until the currents can find their balance in the thought of a great philosopher. Thomas Aquinas, for example, went beyond the conflict of the theological tradition of St. Augustine and the doctrines of Aristotle to show that what seemed to be two antagonistic truths were in reality one. Likewise, Descartes showed that Galileo’s mathematical physics did not necessarily mean abandoning great truths about God and the soul, which were the metaphysical foundation needed for true physics. Kant retained the truths of God and the soul in the

⁶ Gilson, “Le rôle de la philosophie dans l’histoire de la civilisation,” 531.

face of Newtonian physics with a double critique of reason that showed under what conditions physics and ethics are possible.⁷ Human thought spontaneously tends toward realizing unity without which there is neither order nor peace and both are found only in the agreement of ideas among themselves, of sentiments among them and with ideas, of actions finally with the sentiments and the ideas.⁸ The agreement of ideas constitutes the base of the edifice and prepares, beyond the agreement of each one with himself, the agreement of men among themselves. The philosopher, in thinking for himself, thinks for all men and reestablishes an equilibrium by always adjusting spiritual values and in, assuring their order, making possible their advancement.

Third, philosophy endures beyond the civilization that it expresses. With effort, we understand that the philosophies of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, Kant and others still have something to teach us today because each great philosophy contains eternal truth that goes

⁷ *Ibid.*, 532.

⁸ In 1926, Gilson was in the final stage of directing Henri Gouhier's doctoral work on Malebranche in which we find a more elaborate presentation of a similar world of ideas: "The 'ideas' of a philosopher belong to two worlds. There are those that are the product of his reflection; they have been mulled over at leisure, purified by analysis, and joined together into a system, a logical poem that sings the triumph of reason when, freed from time, it was able to reach eternal things. But underneath these clear ideas, there are those that participate in that other system that is the living person. These are more tendencies than concepts. They have not yet been collected into a definition, and they extend into each other, a landscape without lines like the colors of the sky. They live in those regions of the soul where heredity, education, social influences and other fay creatures sow seeds that will later blossom into passions, into beliefs, into worries, without it being possible for us to follow the mysterious labor of their development. An interior temple where all the gods have their altar, it is from there that both cries of revolt and words of love escape; it is there that systems plunge their roots, for it is there where questions are perhaps posed and where certainly solutions are formulated" (Henri Gouhier, *La vocation de Malebranche* [Paris: J. Vrin, 1926], 135). Gilson wondered "si la vie philosophique n'est pas précisément un effort constant pour amener les irrationnels qui sont en nous à l'état de rationalité" (Etienne Gilson, "La notion de philosophie chrétienne," *Bulletin de la société française de philosophie* 31 [séance du 21 mars 1931]: 46–47).

beyond the accidental and the historical, a nontemporal element that makes these men perpetual contemporaries to all human reason. Moreover, all great philosophies are efforts of conciliation, not eclecticism. Regardless of the historical period, each great philosopher seeks not an agreement of ideas in mutual concessions that can be assented to, nor an attempt to adapt his idea to others. Instead, the goal is to probe its necessary and permanent depths so as to release an idea in a pure state and make the differences that divided his predecessors vanish. Given Plato's idea, the being of Parmenides and the becoming of Heraclitus appear as illusions. St. Thomas's analogical nature all at once satisfies the rights of God and those of a creature in making the God of Denys the Areopagite appear as postulated by the universe of Aristotle; and Descartes's *cogito* or viewpoint of pure thought sees Aristotle's physics as a false spiritualism and Epicurus's atomism as a materialism without a foundation. The entire history of philosophy is nothing more than this experience unceasingly begun again. This is why the great philosophical systems generate an interest more vast than the particular civilizations they express.

Beyond the problems of each generation are the problems that man himself poses. And just as we have to go deep within ourselves to get beyond ourselves, we have to reduce ideas to their pure essences to render them necessary and universal. Philosophy performs that reduction and that work goes beyond the limits of a particular time or form of civilization. It is not even an event localized in the past, a unique moment in irreversible history. It is more an event beyond the conditions of space and time, persisting in some way in an eternal present. Socrates's method, Plato's idea, Aristotle's nature and Bergson's pure duration have their youth guaranteed by the necessity internal to essences

that reason thinks and more immutable than science itself.⁹ So if civilization is not simply the way of life of a nation and a particular time, but also the treasure of accumulated truths and spiritual values common to entire humanity, philosophy engenders not only order in thoughts, it engenders the truth; or, rather it only engenders order because it engenders the truth. Thus, there is no internal contradiction among the three ways of writing the history of philosophy that Gilson distinguished. Philosophy clearly is a result of history, but it also creates it, and its creative effort is essentially a nontemporal act of submission to the truth.¹⁰

Gilson's address at the International Congress in 1926 remains interesting for a number of reasons. It shows, in a certain sense, why and how Gilson found reasons to philosophize in the history of philosophy. While it appears natural for a thinker to be a philosopher and a historian of philosophy, the question is how the two coexist in the same mind. Two of Gilson's famous students and subsequent colleagues had opinions on this matter. Describing Gilson the historian meeting Gilson the philosopher as Gilson's "own secret," Professor Pegis hazarded this interpretation of Gilson's work:

It is as though Gilson the historian, studying the human pursuit of truth in widely separated centuries and under widely separated conditions, has discovered that as a philosopher he is rooted to

⁹ From the 1920s onward, Gilson maintained the *sui generis* existence of philosophy in which doctrines only serve to verify concretely the abstract necessity of certain intelligible relations, but had difficulty locating the concepts that constitute it: "Depuis Parménides, un monde de concepts et de relations conceptuelles flotte dans (dans quoi?); disons flotte; il suffit d'en accepter une pour se trouver engagé dans des déterminations déjà en partie reconnues et auxquelles la pensée ne peut plus se soustraire. Voyez Malebranche. Il recommence l'occasionalisme des As'harites, parce qu'il part comme eux d'Allah" (9 June 1966 letter of Gilson to Henri Gouhier, cited after "Lettres d'Étienne Gilson à Henri Gouhier," choisies et présentées par Géry Prouvost, *Revue Thomiste* XCIV, no. 3: *Autour d'Étienne Gilson: Etudes et documents* [Juillet–Septembre 1994]: 477).

¹⁰ Gilson, "Le rôle de la philosophie dans l'histoire de la civilisation," 534–535.

one and the same spot. In a word, beyond and through men he has seen man, beyond and through the philosophers he has seen philosophy, and beyond the caravan of philosophical opinions and doctrines he has seen truth.¹¹

For Professor Gouhier, Gilson was a philosopher, not because he first lived and then philosophized, but precisely because, from the start, he could never live without meditating on his life. Gilson “had been a philosopher from the start because he had always known and loved life in its fullness. . . . Gilson’s activity had always largely overwhelmed the vast culture of the specialist.”¹² Describing Gilson as “a man who forced himself to think about his humanity,” Gouhier located the starting point of Gilson’s philosophy in a humanism.¹³ An understanding of man taken in his entirety includes the notion of civilization and Gilson’s reflection from the beginning to the end of his career centers on man in all his diverse experiences. Gilson, the philosopher and historian, but also the lover of art and music, and the traveler who appreciated various cultures more fully because of his mastery of their languages, did not consider civilization as something accidental to man. For Gilson, it is in civilization that human nature has its life and being.

Gilson serves as a good example of the contention in his paper that philosophy is always young and new because it cannot be repeated and must be thought anew. It is original in every age like the lives of men themselves. In the case of Gilson, he confronted questions not in the history of philosophy, but as they arose in his life. The articles on art, aesthetics, and the interior life that Gilson wrote about while a machine gun lieutenant during World War I do not treat theories professed on a given subject; they go right to the heart of a philosophical ques-

¹¹ Anton C. Pegis, “Gilson and Thomism,” *Thought* 21 (1946): 440–441.

¹² Henri Gouhier, “Étienne Gilson Historien et Philosophe,” in *Études sur l’histoire des idées en France depuis le XVIIe siècle* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1980), 162.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 165.

tion.¹⁴ They engage philosophy in trying to explain what makes a person an artist and to define the conditions of a humanity worthy of that name. In other words, Gilson philosophized to live intelligently. His call to philosophy sprang first from his need to know what makes man an artist. The exigence of aesthetic experience provoked a reflection on all of man's functions: one cannot truly seize the significance of art without grasping the significance of science, metaphysics, ethics, and religion. If philosophy did not follow the history of philosophy, these two disciplines, at first separated, came together in the paper he delivered in 1926.

Gilson found no contradiction among the three ways of writing history outlined in his paper at Harvard and found all three justified in terms of being historically true. His third, non-historical, basically metaphysical conception of philosophy developed and deepened over time but did not change. Gilson understood that fundamental philosophical oppositions are not so much between truth and error as between partial truths and the whole truth. The method Gilson employed in his philosophical works delineating the philosophical conclusions that necessarily follow from a principle was purely dialectical in nature; hence, all of its conclusions are only probable. Determining what men have thought the truth to be led Gilson to see, within the framework of history, the nature and laws of philosophical thinking. But because certain conclusions necessarily follow from a principle does not prove the conclusions are necessary in themselves or that the principle from which they flow is true or false. History only guarantees that the conclusions have necessarily emerged from the principle, and it is then up to philosophers to see the truth. If they cannot accept the conclusions because they are not in accord with reality, they must give up the principle; and

¹⁴ See Gilson's "Art et métaphysique," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 23 (1916): 243–267, and "Essai sur la vie intérieure," *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 89 (1920): 23–78.

if for the same reason they cannot accept the principle, they must deny the conclusions. Thus, the dialectic of history can help philosophers arrive at the truth, but it cannot give it to them: “the only task of history is to understand and to make understood, whereas philosophy must choose, demonstrate, and judge. Applying to history for reasons to make a choice is no longer history, it is philosophy.”¹⁵

As Gilson understood it, the proper method of philosophy does not rest on the history of philosophy, but rather on the intellectual intuition of principles and the direct perception of their truth. Nothing is more important than a philosopher’s choice of his own principles. Metaphysical knowledge is not a conclusion drawn from principles, but the immediate grasping of principles themselves and especially being, which is the absolutely first principle. Moreover, the intuition of principles is necessary and not probable knowledge, for it cannot be otherwise. The metaphysician resorts to experimentation in philosophy because the intellectual intuition of principles is difficult and insecure. Auxiliary methods are useful in order to gain the intuition and to deepen and maintain it. Experience in the history of philosophy is not metaphysical experience itself. It does not make one see, but leads one to the point from where one sees.¹⁶

Gilson’s brilliant philosophical works constitute an impressive body of evidence that his own metaphysical position respects the facts of the human condition as well as the lessons of the history of philosophy. Gilson opted for “that kind of philosophy which consists neither in thinking about thought nor in directly knowing reality but in knowing

¹⁵ Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, ix–x.

¹⁶ For Gilson’s apologia for his method, see his “Remarques sur l’expérience en métaphysique,” in *Actes du XIe Congrès internationale de philosophie*, Bruxelles, 20–26 août 1953, vol. 4 (Amsterdam: North Holland, 1953), 9–10. For a translation and excellent analysis, see, Armand A. Maurer, C.S.B., “Gilson’s Use of History in Philosophy,” in *Thomistic Papers V*, ed. Thomas A. Russman (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1990), 25–47.

the relation of thought to reality,” and asked “history what that relation has been in order to ascertain what it should be.”¹⁷ He concluded that the principle of all principles was that “a philosopher should always put first in his mind what is actually first in reality. What is first in reality need not be what is the most easily accessible to human understanding; it is that whose presence or absence entails the presence or absence of all the rest in reality.”¹⁸ For Gilson, such a principle, the correct object of philosophy which grounds the unity of philosophical experience, has neither past nor future because it is, that is, it is being. As such, the truth about it cannot be proved, it can only be seen—or, as history reveals, overlooked.

These insights led to Gilson’s own contribution to the history of philosophy which consisted of a philosophical synthesis of an existential metaphysics and a philosophical realism, both of which remained within the bosom of theology. The philosophical anthropology flowing from Gilson’s Christian philosophy, I think, is well equipped to study the human person within contemporary society and cultures. It can grapple successfully with the tragic loss of confidence in human reason and the resulting pathologies and threats to human freedom so prevalent in Western civilization today. Such a philosophy can constitute the basis for a civilization of freedom and unmask civilizations of totalitarianism.

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Due to its long historical memory, a country such as Poland, more so than countries in Western Europe, can serve as an excellent laboratory in which to sustain and nurture a Christian philosophy like Gilson’s. The “Iron Curtain” that surrounded Eastern European societies blocked information coming from Western Europe so Eastern Eu-

¹⁷ Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, x.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, ix.

Europeans could not follow closely the changes that since World War II dramatically restructured Western Civilization. But Poles, in general, and Polish intellectuals, in particular, have retained a picture of the civilization which preceded these changes: one in which Christianity had relative strength and classical metaphysics and epistemology were discussed and part of educational curricula, one which presupposed a continuity between antiquity and Christianity and modern times, one in which the Enlightenment and Romanticism were considered dissenting voices in a civilization that remained classical and Christian, and one which had little in common with the attempts by the European Union and its elites to fashion a new European identity turning peoples into a post-historical, post-national, post-metaphysical, post-Christian, and even a post-religious society held together by an ideology of “Euro-peism.”¹⁹ The long historical memory of Poles can help them see Europe from a broader perspective historically and philosophically and remain true defenders of Western civilization in the genuine sense of the term.



Gilson on Philosophy and Civilization

SUMMARY

In his essay “The Role of Philosophy in the History of Civilization” presented at the 6th International Philosophical Congress at Harvard in 1926, Gilson outlined three general trends among historians of philosophy. Some reduce the history of philosophy to study sources and find explanations of the philosophy beyond itself. Others try to go beyond the source of a given philosophy to find the original intuition that generates it. A third position, which Gilson espoused, is ahistorical. It depends neither on society nor on the creative genius of philosophers; it is simply truth. Systems of philosophy are uniquely conditioned by the necessary relations that link the ideas. If philosophies are expres-

¹⁹ Ryszard Legutko, “Battle for Europe,” *First Things* (April 2018). Available online—see the section *References* for details.

sions of an eternal truth, dominating men and societies, which discovers itself progressively by the mediation of philosophers, philosophy is transcendent with regard to every given state of civilization and the worth of a civilization depends upon the extent it participates in truth. Gilson's conception of philosophy can go far in restoring Western civilization's loss of confidence in human reason with its resulting pathologies and threats to human freedom today.

KEYWORDS

Gilson, civilization, philosophy, history of philosophy.

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