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Étienne Gilson in Charlottesville

Although born on different sides of the Atlantic, a Frenchman, Étienne Gilson (1884–1978), and an American, Albert G. A. Balz (1887–1957), shared much in common academically, influenced one another's work, and became lifelong friends. Both studied philosophy—Gilson at the Lycée Henri le Grand and the University of Paris, Balz at the University of Virginia and Columbia University. Both completed doctoral theses on major seventeenth-century philosophers—Gilson on Descartes and Balz on Hobbes and Spinoza. After completion of his doctoral work, Balz joined the Department of Philosophy at the University of Virginia in 1913 and in 1920 became a full professor.[1] After teaching in lycées for several years (1907–1913), Gilson taught at the University of Lille for a year until World War I broke out. Mobilized in 1914 and assigned to the infantry, Gilson was captured by the Germans in 1916. He remained a prisoner of war until 1918 when he returned to teaching at the University of Strasbourg. He taught there until 1921, when he was appointed professor of the history of philosophy at the Sorbonne and Director of Studies for Medieval Theologies and Philosophies at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris.

Gilson completed two doctoral theses on Descartes and Scholasticism under the direction of Lucien Levy-Bruhl, a professor at the Sorbonne whom Gilson described as “[t]he man to whom I am indebted for my first knowledge of Saint Thomas Aquinas.” According to Gilson, Levy-Bruhl “had never opened a single one of the works of Thomas, nor did he ever intend to do so,” but he taught Gilson how to see facts “in an impartial, cold, and objective light, just as they were.” During his nine years of doctoral preparation under Levy-Bruhl, Gilson learned two things: “first, to read Saint Thomas Aquinas; secondly, that Descartes had vainly tried to solve . . . philosophical problems whose only correct position and solution were inseparable from the method of Saint Thomas Aquinas.”[2] Gilson became increasingly convinced of medieval thought's superiority to more “modern” philosophy. He concluded one of his doctoral theses with the comment, “the thought of Descartes, in comparison with the sources from which it derives, marks much less a gain than a loss.”[3]

Familiar with Gilson's groundbreaking study of Descartes as well as Gilson's prodigious work in modern as well as medieval philosophy (eight books, more than forty articles, and numerous reviews published by 1925), Balz shared Gilson's interest in the Scholastic background of modern philosophy. This led to Balz's invitation to Gilson to come to the University of Virginia in 1926 and give

two summer courses. This would be Gilson's first visit to the United States and he had doubts about his English proficiency. Balz assured him: "That makes no difference. We all speak bad English: in America you simply go ahead and speak it in your own way." [4] Gilson set sail from Le Havre in late July 1926. After arriving in New York he took the overnight train to Charlottesville. Balz met him at the station the next day and escorted him to the Colonnade Club, where Gilson lived during his two-month stay.

From August 2 to September 12, Gilson taught two courses: "The Development of Thought from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Centuries" and "The Evolution of French Thought from the Sixteenth Century to the Present." His courses consisted of formal lectures in English supplemented by tutorials in which students translated passages of French philosophy into English. The students were mostly young men, but included two women, three professors, plus a number of local women who knew some French and appreciated French culture. While in Charlottesville, Gilson wrote his wife Thérèse frequently and sent her details about his experiences. In his letters, Gilson mentioned Mrs. Randolph; Mrs. Goodwin, who lived in a beautiful white stone Greek style house with a large garden; [5] Mrs. Neff; Mrs. Balz; Mrs. Forsythe, who lived the rest of the year on a ranch in Wyoming; and Mrs. Blake who spent most of the year in a villa in Cap Martin, had an apartment in Paris, and brought a French *femme de chambre* with her to Charlottesville. These ladies, as well as Professors Pott and Lefevre, who also taught philosophy, soon invited Gilson to their respective homes for lunches and dinners, and to accompany their families on trips to the countryside. Gilson enjoyed visiting Monticello ("in the style of Palladio and superbly situated"), the Natural Bridge, and Washington and Lee University.

Gilson was intrigued by American barbershops, savory Virginia cantaloupes and luscious peaches sold in roadside stands, the efficient system of self-service meals in cafeterias, mint juleps (despite alcohol being prohibited!), "Five and Dime" stores, and "Drive It Yourself" car rentals. He explained to Thérèse the details of the University of Virginia's Honor System, "of which everyone was justly proud." If a student was caught cheating, he was referred by the student who caught him to a student tribunal to decide the case. The tribunal always expelled those found guilty from the university and established the day and hour of the guilty student's departure; two hundred students would stand guard on the street to watch the departure and remain in place until the train had left the station. Finally, the tribunal which condemned the student would inform the president of the university that X had left the university for lacking honor. Gilson found the system "simply admirable." [6]

From the outset of his courses, Gilson was concerned about his spoken English, but it quickly improved and his students clearly learned something about French philosophy. Gilson's circle of friends and acquaintances continued to grow. He

met Mrs. Wagenheim and Professor Echols and his wife, social events became more numerous after the middle of August, and Gilson was thrilled by his glimpses into Charlottesville society.[7] In short, Gilson came to love Virginia's climate, the mountains, and Charlottesville's graceful southern civility. In late August 1926, Gilson wrote Thérèse that he found it "difficult to say how nice everyone is to me. I have never seen such a refined courtesy" and "people so perfectly well bred. Existence here goes on in a tranquil routine which amazes me. Why wasn't I born in Virginia? And why haven't I been teaching philosophy to young Americans?"[8]

After Gilson's summer at the University of Virginia, the careers of Professors Balz and Gilson followed similar paths. In 1929, Balz became chairman of the University of Virginia's Department of Philosophy and remained in that position until 1955. During the 1920s and 1930s, Balz published a number of articles on Descartes, on important Cartesians, and on the development of Cartesian doctrine.[9] Balz was especially interested in the derivation of Cartesian philosophy from Scholastic and Thomistic thought, an area that Gilson also continued to explore. Balz served as president of the American Philosophical Association, the Virginia Philosophical Association, the Southern Society for Philosophy and Psychology, and the Southern Society for the Philosophy of Religion. He also served on the Charlottesville School Board where he was chairman for a number of years. As for Gilson, the years 1925 to 1932 marked the peak of his career as a professor at the Sorbonne. In 1929, he founded the Institute for Mediaeval Studies in Toronto and began spending part of each year in Canada, and, in 1932, he was appointed to the prestigious Collège de France as Professor of Medieval Philosophy.

In 1935, Balz began pressing Gilson to revisit the Corcoran School of Philosophy at the University of Virginia and give the fourth James W. Richard Lecture in 1936. As Balz put it, "[f]rom our point of view the Richard's Lectureship will never be what it should be until Gilson has held the lectureship." [10] The lectures were established by the will of Este Coffinberry (1857–1921) to bring scholars to Charlottesville to speak on a subject "within the range of Christianity." Coffinberry's will further stipulated that the lecturer had to be a scholar of international reputation and the lectures were to be such that the university might publish them as a book.[11]

Grateful to Balz for having prompted his first trip to North America, Gilson accepted Balz's invitation, but for 1937. Gilson considered lecturing on the theology of Eloise (Abelard's lover) and then settled on "Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages." This topic allowed him to return to the challenging theme of attempting to bring faith and knowledge into an organic unity which he addressed in his lectures on "The Unity of Philosophical Experience" given at Harvard in the first half of the academic year 1936–1937. When Balz sought

Gilson's advice on whether to write a book on Descartes, Gilson encouraged him to do so. Gilson had read all of Balz's articles on Descartes and Cartesianism and found them to be sound. Gilson went on to comment on the "the extraordinary difficulty" he would find in trying to write a book in Charlottesville: "Life is too charming there and it is almost a crime to do anything else besides enjoying it." [12]

Gilson's three Richard Lectures, delivered in Madison Hall at the University of Virginia on the evenings of October 9–11, 1937, allowed him to dissect Saint Thomas Aquinas's thought, and analyze and synthesize their parts. The lectures constituted an important step in Gilson reaching a satisfactory understanding of the relationship between philosophy and theology within the thought of Saint Thomas Aquinas.

In the Richard Lectures characterized by his usual combination of erudition, lucidity, and wit, Gilson discredited the vulgar assumption that "from the rise of Christianity to the dawn of the Renaissance, the normal use of natural reason was obscured by blind faith in the absolute truth of Christian Revelation." [12] Gilson did so by schematically analyzing the interplay of rationalism and fideism within three main "spiritual families" or philosophical traditions of medieval times.

In the first lecture, "The Primacy of Faith," Gilson discussed those who set faith and reason in opposition and accorded primacy to faith because of the radical insufficiency of human reason except as supported by Revelation. This included fundamentalists like Tertulian who maintained that "since God has spoken to us, it is no longer necessary for us to think." [14] Within this family Gilson also situated Saint Augustine and his followers such as St. Anselm, Roger Bacon, Raymon Lull, and Nicolas Malebranche who take faith as a starting point, make it a necessary prerequisite to understanding, and then attempt to achieve rational understanding of the content of faith. St. Anselm succinctly summarized this principle in his famous phrase, "Credo ut intelligam" ("I believe so that I may know"). Throughout history the "Augustinians" have developed widely differing philosophical constructs because they always easily reach agreement on what is believed but vary as to what can be understood.

In his second lecture "The Primacy of Reason," Gilson explored the view that treats reason or philosophical speculation as autonomous and separate from Revelation. This position—first developed by the Mohammedan philosopher Averroes—considered reason alone as providing the necessary evidence of truth and split into two groups when it was introduced into Christian thought in the thirteenth century. The first group subordinated philosophical conclusions to faith and thus maintained a blind fideism in theology with skepticism in philosophy. These thinkers considered philosophy as an interesting, but useless, intellectual exercise which led inevitably to conclusions that had to be

rejected because they were at variance with what were taken as the data of Revelation. The second group consisted of pure rationalists. They endorsed orthodoxy in religion while placing their absolute trust in philosophy and indicating the contradictions in the theological doctrines they professed to believe. In other words, for the rationalists, philosophy and theology belong to different provinces; the philosophers and theologians should leave each other alone to their own devices.

In his final lecture, "The Harmony of Reason and Revelation," Gilson elaborated Saint Thomas's position on solving the problem which the preceding two philosophical families could not resolve by rigidly delimitating the spheres of faith and knowledge. Theologism maintained that every part of Revelation should be understood, while rationalism maintained that no part of Revelation could be understood. Gilson interpreted Saint Thomas, who first proposed the idea of theology as a science, as adopting a more nuanced and harmonious position.

For Saint Thomas, Revelation contains articles of faith and provides all men with truths sufficient for their salvation. Within Revelation, Saint Thomas distinguished truths available to human reason and those that transcend reason. Some truths of Revelation can be rationally demonstrated (e.g., the existence of God), but have to be revealed because not all men are metaphysicians and all men need to be saved. Those portions of Revelation attainable by natural reason should be considered as necessary preambles or presuppositions of faith rather than articles of faith properly understood. When a revealed truth becomes an object of knowledge it ceases to be believed because it is known. Only those who cannot see its truth in the light of reason accept it by simple faith. And there are revealed truths that surpass, but never contradict reason (e.g., the Trinity, Incarnation, and Redemption). Reason cannot prove them to be true or false. For any sincere believer, any opposition between faith and reason is a sure sign that something is wrong with one's philosophy because faith is a safe guide to rational truth and an infallible warning against philosophical error.

In his lectures, Gilson distinguished philosophy and theology based on their methods of proof and "excluded from theology all necessary demonstrations of a purely rational nature." For Saint Thomas, theology is a science "whose conclusions necessarily follow from their principles; but those principles are articles of faith, and faith itself is an assent to the word of God accepted as word of God." Philosophy is different, just as knowledge is different from belief. Theology, whose principles are articles of faith, does not demonstrate its conclusions philosophically, and philosophy does not deduce its conclusions from faith. Gilson excluded from theology all purely rational demonstrations because the conclusions of theology follow from articles of faith.[15] But, at the

same time, Gilson also admitted that a theologian could become somewhat of a philosopher by demonstrating a revealed truth such as the existence of God, by using philosophy to demonstrate a revealed truth which also is accessible to natural reason. The problem is that Gilson did not specify how and why this could be done—i.e., how a rational demonstration could find a place in theology.

More than two decades later Gilson would call the conception of theology he put forth in the Richard Lectures—one that excludes all rational demonstration, i.e., all philosophy—an “illusion.” Additional years of studying the thought of Saint Thomas led Gilson to understand that for Saint Thomas even conclusions that followed from rational premises could be theological if used by the theologian as a means of understanding the faith. This conception of theology *includes* philosophy as its handmaiden while preserving its rationality in order to be of service to theology. Gilson argued that philosophy in such a state, “Christian Philosophy” as he called it, benefits from its service to theology and makes more progress by becoming more rational.[16]

Gilson concluded his Richard Lectures with a discussion of the breakdown of Saint Thomas’s position and the progressive deterioration of theology and philosophy because great late medieval philosophers and theologians such as Thomas Cajetan, Dun Scotus, and William of Ockham lost confidence in speculative thought. They increasingly ascribed to faith alone not only what Saint Thomas would call the articles of faith but even what he defined as rational preambles to matters of faith. Their list of revealed truths that can be either believed or proven steadily grew shorter and shorter to the point of shriveling into nothingness. Then these thinkers denied that the articles of faith themselves could be proved even in theology by rational and necessary demonstrations, i.e., they can be proved provided they are first believed, but philosophical reason utterly fails to prove them. The result was a final divorce between reason and Revelation. Having no use for philosophy or for speculative theology, some masters of the Christian life found their way out of this maze with what they called the union of the soul with God. Others wishing to steer clear of obscure and unsafe mysteries of such mystical union opted for a straightforward practical Christian life and nothing else. During the Renaissance, Erasmus summed up this view with two sayings: “Away with philosophy” and “Back to the Gospel.” Likewise, Martin Luther distanced himself from speculative theology as he also had no use for Scholastic philosophy. The upshot was that men of the sixteenth century found themselves confronted with a theology without philosophy and a philosophy without theology.

In the Richard Lectures Gilson maintained that the slow and fluctuating history of ideas is determined from within by the internal necessity of ideas themselves so that whenever the problem of the relation of faith and reason is posed “the abstract conditions of its solutions are bound to remain the same.” Gilson

illustrated the perennial nature of the question of how reason and religious belief are related by considering the positions in the *Varieties of Religious Experience* by William James and the *Twofold Sources of Ethics and Religion* by Henri Bergson. After reading James who held that it does one good to believe in God, Gilson wanted to know if there is a God. Is my religious experience an experience of God or an experience of myself? The problem with revelation is that it requires “that there is some divinely made statement to which we must bow.” As for Bergson who described mystical intuition as a source of religious life, Gilson still wondered “what the nature of that intuition actually is. Is it a self-sufficient intuition of an object which may also be the object of religious faith, or is it an experience in faith and through faith of the God in whom we believe?”[17]

Gilson dedicated the published version of the Richard Lectures “To my friend Albert G. A. Balz, Corcoran Professor of Philosophy in the University of Virginia.” In his forward to the lectures Gilson acknowledged his indebtedness to the friends and colleagues who invited him to the University of Virginia eleven years earlier, specifically recalling and expressing “lasting gratitude” to “the students of the Summer School of 1926 who kindly helped me through a difficult task.” Looking back on that summer course from a vantage point closer to our time, one commentator remarked, “We can hardly overestimate the debt that American and Canadian scholarship owes to all those students and faculty who helped Gilson become familiar with academic life and language on these shores.”[18]

During the decades following the Richard Lectures, Gilson was elected to the Académie Française, his Institute for Mediaeval Studies in Toronto flourished, and he became world-renowned both as a historian and philosopher. At the University of Virginia, Professor Balz went on to be named Corcoran Professor of Philosophy and retained that chair until his retirement in June 1957. In the early 1950s, he published a book on Descartes and another that contained his numerous articles on individual Cartesians.[19] Gilson declined to review these works, explaining that “I have given up many years ago, the thankless task of reviewing the works of my contemporaries. In the present case, I would have had a divided mind between my very old friendship for Professor Balz and my firm decision to keep away from book reviewing.”[20]

Gilson never returned to Charlottesville after delivering the Richard Lectures, although Charlottesville always remained a very special place for him. In 1956, in what appears to be Gilson’s last letter to Balz, he wrote: “I have never forgotten the University of Virginia, your charming hospitality and the happy days which, owing to you, I spent there. I have often regretted that my life, overcrowded as it is with all sorts of obligations, has never permitted me to accept invitations which would have brought me back to Charlottesville. But I wish you would feel quite assured that my friendship has remained identically

what it was. The only difference is that I now treasure it as part of a past which is so dear to my heart.”[21]

Notes

[1] Biographical details of these two scholars are based on “Vie, Titres et Fonctions d’Étienne Gilson,” in *Mélanges offerts à Étienne Gilson*, ed. Alex Denomy (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies and Paris: J. Vrin, 1959), 9–14; Lawrence K. Shook, *Étienne Gilson* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984); and Thelma Z. Lavine, “Balz, Albert George Adam,” in *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, ed. John T. Kneebone, J. Jefferson Looney, Brent Tarter, and Sandra Gioia Treadway (Richmond: Library of Virginia, 1998), vol. I, 311–12.

[2] Étienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1941), xiii.

[3] Étienne Gilson, *The Philosopher and Theology*, trans. Cécile Gilson (New York: Random House, 1962), 88–89.

[4] Shook, *Étienne Gilson*, 139.

[5] The William Hall Goodwin House, an award-winning historic property, designed by the preeminent architect Eugene Bradbury and built in 1923, stands on the corner of Rugby and Oxford Roads in Charlottesville.

[6] Gilson, in a letter to his wife dated September 3, 1926. See Gilson’s Letters to Thérèse Gilson, August 3–September 7, 1926, Gilson Papers, Étienne Gilson Archives, John M. Kelly Library of St. Michael’s College, University of Toronto, Canada.

[7] Shook, *Étienne Gilson*, 139–44.

[8] Gilson, in a letter to his wife dated August 24, 1926, as quoted by Shook, *Étienne Gilson*, 143.

[9] Gregor Sebba, *Bibliographia Cartesiana: A Critical Guide to the Descartes Literature 1800–1960* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1964), 163–64.

[10] Balz, in a letter to Gilson dated December 16, 1935; Papers of Albert G. A. Balz, Box 2, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library.

[11] Balz, in a letter to Gilson dated November 29, 1935; Papers of Albert G. A. Balz, Box 2.

[12] Gilson, in a letter to Balz dated June 14, 1935; Papers of Albert G. A. Balz, Box 2.

- [13] Étienne Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1939, 2nd ed. 1966), 3–4. The last two lectures also were given at Fordham University in December 1937. See Anton C. Pegis's review of *Reason and Revelation* in *Thought* 14(2) (June 1939): 341. Unconvinced by the main thesis of the lectures, one reviewer described Gilson's "charming little book" as "anti-scientific." See Justus Buchler, "Philosophers, Intuitive and Scientific," *Virginia Quarterly Review* (Spring 1939): 311–12.
- [14] Gilson, *Reason and Revelation*, 6.
- [15] *Ibid.*, 76, 78.
- [16] Armand Maurer, "Translator's Introduction," in Étienne Gilson, *Christian Philosophy*, trans. Armand Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1993), xiv–xvii.
- [17] Gilson, *Reason and Revelation*, 95–99.
- [18] James V. Schall, "Possessed of Both a Reason and a Revelation," *A Thomistic Tapestry*, ed. Peter A. Redpath (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), 178.
- [19] Albert G. A. Balz, *Cartesian Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), and his most important work, *Descartes and the Modern Mind* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1952). Balz viewed Descartes's philosophy not as a revolt, but as a continuation of Thomism derived from it and wholly intelligible within it. On this position, see J. Mourant, "Cartesian Man and Thomistic Man," *The Journal of Philosophy* 54 (1957): 373–83, and Albert G. A. Balz, "Concerning the Thomistic and Cartesian Dualisms: A Rejoinder to Professor Mourant," *The Journal of Philosophy* 54 (1957): 383–90.
- [20] Letter of Étienne Gilson to Charlotte Kohler, editor of the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, dated August 27, 1952; Papers of the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Box 95, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library.
- [21] Gilson, in a letter to Balz dated January 16, 1956; Papers of Albert G. A. Balz, Box 2. The University of Virginia built a dormitory in 1956 and named it Balz in his honor. That dormitory was demolished in 2009 and replaced with a modern residence hall jointly named after Professor Balz and Professor Dobie, who served as dean of the School of Law at the University of Virginia until 1939. The Balz-Dobie residence hall was completed in August 2011.

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