

Terror, Totalitarianism, and Philosophy

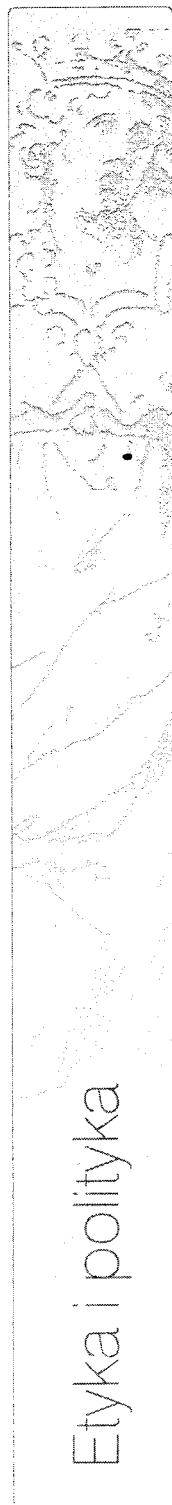
The main philosophical and academic events of Étienne Gilson's (1884–1978) long and productive life are well known and warrant his being described as the most striking single figure in Catholic thought in the 20th century.¹ Prior to discussing two of Gilson's essays in which he applied philosophical principles to the problems of the day, I wish to review less well known aspects of Gilson's life relevant to those essays.

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First, Gilson experienced the terror of war. In 1914, at the outbreak of World War I, Gilson was called up as a sergeant assigned to instruct recruits, then placed in charge of a machine gun section, and finally sent to the Verdun Front in 1915. In February 1916, the day after he and an adjutant were the only survivors in a dugout that was bombed, Gilson was buried by an enemy shell and dug out under enemy guns. He spent the rest of the war in prisoner of war camps at Mainz, Vöhrenbach, Brug-bei-Magdeburg, and Strölen-Moohr, Kreis Sulingen. After the War, Gilson led a League of Nations relief mission from 15 August to 15 September of 1922 to aid children in the famine-stricken regions of Russia and Ukraine. The images of the wide spread suffering and death of these most pitiable, young, innocent victims, many of them orphans, would haunt Gilson for years to come.² Gilson came to know

¹ Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, Forward to Étienne Gilson's *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*, trans. Mark A. Wauck (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), p. 7.

² Étienne Gilson, "Enquête sur la situation actuelle des enfants en Ukraine et dans les régions de la Volga," *Revue Internationale de la Croix-Rouge et Bulletin International des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge* 4, 46 (October 1922), pp. 883–897. See also his "Aid for Russian Children," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 79, no. 16 (October 14, 1922), p. 1349, and Laurence K. Shook, *Etienne Gilson* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984), pp. 109ff.



war again, this time in German-occupied Paris where he and his family lived throughout World War II. They had Nazi soldiers billeted in their Paris apartment and house in Vermenton. Twice Gilson was approached by German officials and twice he refused to collaborate. When the Gilsons returned to their home in Vermenton they found it severely damaged by the Germans.

Second, Gilson was no stranger to totalitarianism and education as they were addressed within the world of national and international politics. At the end of World War II, Gilson attempted to establish a Catholic social order by resuming his pre-war struggle to unify French Catholics and induce the French Republic to abandon its secularization of state-supported public education.³ He viewed fascism – whether in its German, Russian, Italian, or Spanish form, along with the type of education advocated by John Dewey (focused on producing its own brand of citizen with no need for teaching moral and intellectual virtue) – as the major obstacle to the realization of such a social order. Gilson thought that Christians and nonbelievers could share a certain “humanism” that keeps faith with “realism” and with human freedom but he understood well that the first step of any totalitarian regime is to seize the schools in order to have exclusive monopoly over shaping tomorrow’s citizens.⁴ Convinced that Christians have to create their own social order through their institutions, he focused on the institutions he knew best, the schools. His competence in languages and his activity to promote a renewal of French political life earned him an appointment in 1945 from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a delegate to the San Francisco Conference where the United Nations was established. In October of that same year, Gilson was appointed a delegate to a conference in London from which the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, better known as UNESCO, emerged. He served on the committee to draft its constitution and concentrated on international educational cooperation. Gilson contended that universities would have to become more international in order to be able to educate for peace and contrasted the University of Paris in the thirteenth century with current institutions.⁵ In 1947, the Movement Républicain Populaire (MRP), a centrist Christian Democrat party with an anti-Communist platform, offered him a two-year

3 Étienne Gilson, *Pour un ordre catholique* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1934).

4 Étienne Gilson, “Instruire ou éduquer?” *Le Monde*, January 9, 1945, pp. 1–2.

5 Gilson appreciated Britain’s open educational policy which did not exclude religion and allowed both conformist (Anglican/Presbyterian) and non-conformist (Catholic, Baptist, Wesleyan) schools as opposed to the closed, state-controlled education in France. He pleaded for founding international institutes in all important universities rather than found new international universities. See Shook, *Etienne Gilson*, pp. 254ff., p. 263.

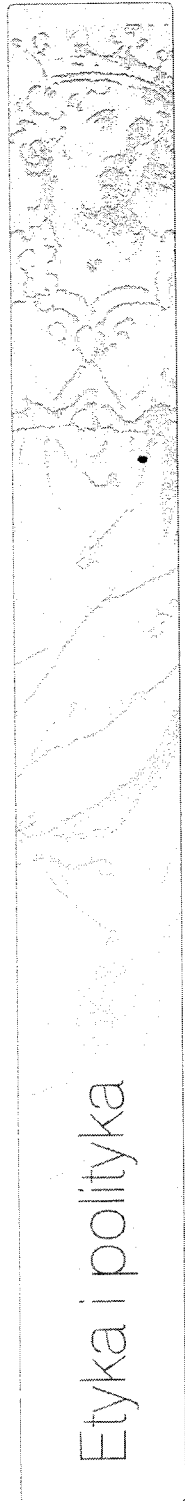
appointed seat in the French Senate or the Conseil de la République. Gilson, who enjoyed battling with the Communists, accepted the seat and remained in the Senate until 1949. He became deeply involved in legislation concerning schools and taxes on books.

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Gilson's official bibliography lists of 830 monographs and articles. In his entire *corpus*, his essay "The Terrors of the Year Two Thousand" written shortly after World War II in 1948 stands alone as a unique and most unusual prophetic work. Described as a "beautiful, frightening, penetrating prose-poem," it contains no references and analyzes what some philosophers would do to us.⁶ Gilson began the essay by outlining the great terror that frightened people in 948 as they were approaching the year 1000, the year when the world was supposed to come to an end. Terrible events were to precede it and they did – war, pestilence, and famine. A fiery dragon was spotted in the sky as was also a whale as big as an island. Even worse was the fear that Satan would be let loose from his prison and the Antichrist would devastate the whole earth during another thousand years before it ended.

Writing a century after 948, Gilson noted that we have seen even worse – the millions killed during World War I, a historical materialism that menaced the entire earth, mass killing in China and Spain, and famine in the Ukraine where starving parents devoured their children and starving children were mowed down by machine guns. This "modest" beginning was followed by Germany invading Poland and then butchering it and other nations; horrors that ensued in Europe, Japan, and China; an entire race condemned to destruction; the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; and no real peace afterwards. Today, Gilson could have cited the atrocities that have occurred in Viet Nam, Northern Ireland, Cambodia, Serbia, Iraq, Rwanda, the Sudan and Syria and added the mass murder of babies legally sanctioned in the Western world by abortion. Science, Gilson pointed out, has become the source of greatest terror because to know has become synonymous with to destroy. Formerly, we mastered nature by obeying it, now it is by destroying it. Nuclear fusion has produced powerful energy while

6 Étienne Gilson, *The Terrors of the Year Two Thousand* (Toronto: St. Michael's College, 1949). References are to its reprinted version with an Introduction by Armand A. Maurer, *Logos* 3, no. 1 (Winter 2000), pp. 13–36; see p. 19.



becoming “the most frightful agent of destruction which man has ever had at his disposal,” far surpasses the forces of fiery dragons or sea monsters.⁷

Although 1948 was too early for Gilson to see clearly our new world created by biology and its effects on life, Gilson saw the beginnings of biological warfare in which we kill by using chemical weapons. And he foresaw a world in which biology intervenes in human destiny by being able to determine the sex of infants and produce “human beings adapted to various functions as do breeders with dogs or horses or cattle.” He, too, wondered as many of us do today, what will become of the liberty and dignity of the human person in such a world? Then Gilson posed the following question: what if these more recent horrors announced a new age more tragic than the one we have experienced? What if the drama we are living is a good dress rehearsal for the end of the world and the arrival of the Antichrist?

Gilson viewed Nietzsche as fitting the description of the Antichrist, not as it was bantered about in the Middle Ages – in the physical sense of having the body of a leopard and the feet of a bear – but in appearing with two of his books in hand, one entitled the *Antichrist*, the other *Ecce Homo* that express one of the most profound aspirations of the human heart and whose message is by far the most important of modern times. Gilson was referring to the message that Nietzsche had Zarathustra murmur – “They still do not know that God is dead.” If the message is true, and Nietzsche thought it was, this would be the greatest revolution in the history of humanity. Man who always lived with the certitude that he lived in a world dominated by a god or gods would be mistaken. As the old Karamazov in Dostoyewski’s work had stated, “If God does not exist, everything is permitted.” Now nothing would be forbidden since it is no longer the case that what was true, good, beautiful under the hypothesis that God exists really is the case. Now man alone creates for himself a new formula of life, but he begins by destroying. Nietzsche knew full well the destructive nature of his message:

I am not a man, I am dynamite [...]. When truth opens war on the age-old falsehood [God exists], we shall witness upheavals unheard of in the history of the world, earthquakes will twist the earth, the mountains and the valleys will be displaced, and everything hitherto imaginable will be surpassed. Politics will then be completely absorbed by the war of ideas and all the combinations

7 Ibid., p. 22.

of power of the old society will be shattered since they are built on falsehood: there will be wars such as the earth will never have seen before. [...] I know the intoxicating pleasure of destroying to a degree proportionate to my power of destruction.⁸

Gilson believed that this was happening right under our very eyes. It seems like every day there is yet another theory thrown at us, “each the harbinger of a new truth which it promises to create shortly, joyously [...] the brave new world of tomorrow by first of all annihilating the world of today.”⁹

Gilson considered the will to destroy, the will to annihilate, as the defining characteristic of our time. Man has become god. Man wants to annihilate all obstacles which interfere with his creative ambitions. Freed from reason and morals and a sovereign judge, man can say anything and do anything. Man, the sole master of his destiny, makes the law and applies it. Whether it be social reform or literature, one must clear the field of any systematic and prior norms and put in its place something completely new and spontaneous. As an example, Gilson cited existentialism which Sartre defined as “nothing other than an effort to draw all the consequences from a coherently atheistic position.”¹⁰ Not only is everything permissible but “man is condemned to be free [...] man without any support and without any help, is condemned at each moment to invent man.”¹¹ Gilson regarded this perpetual invention of the self, making the absurd live, without model, without purpose, without rule as an exhausting and nauseating task for all those not welcoming the invitation to suicide. Men have become gods only to discover they do not know what to do with their divinity.

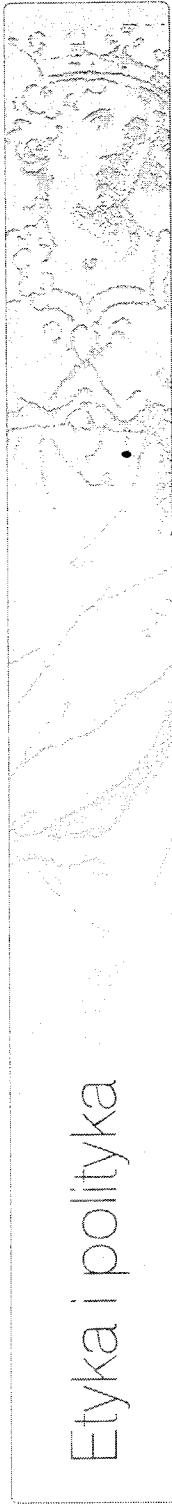
Some, such as the Marxists, exploited atheism and organized a cult of the new god. Marxism freed man because it first freed him of God. But, Gilson denied that such a man is really free: “Once he is free of God, man is no longer free of other men, between whom and himself there never existed any other protection but God and the law of God.” There remains no arbiter between men and the state and if it is no longer God but the state that judges men, who will judge the state? One only

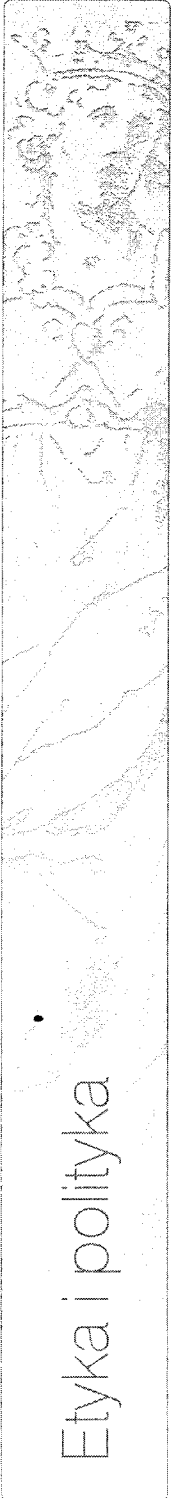
8 Ibid., p. 26.

9 Ibid., p. 28.

10 Ibid., p. 32. “Ever since Nietzsche announced the death of God, the cheerful atheist has been a rare sight [...]. The new shining order of anthropocentrism that was to be built in place of the fallen God never came [...] the world has transformed itself into a place of never-ending worry.” (Leszek Kolakowski, “What is Wrong with God,” in *My Correct Views on Everything*, ed. Zbigniew Janowski (South Bend: St Augustine’s Press, 2005), p. 174 f.).

11 Ibid.





has to look around to see the people waiting for the rich and powerful to decide their lot for them, imposing all sorts of slaveries including the most degrading of all – that of the mind. Man is ready for all the dictators, leaders of the human herds who follow them as guides and who are led by them to the same place – the abattoir.

Since man has abandoned his reason in losing God, “he will not find it again without having first found God again.”¹² Gilson denied that there is nothing left to do or that it is too late to remedy this worrisome situation provided “we have the courage to look for the evil and remedy where they exist.”¹³ The antidote Gilson proposed for rediscovering reason and God can be found in another of his lectures on “Medieval Universalism,” delivered at Harvard University in 1936. In this lecture, Gilson advocated reviving “under some form suitable to our own times” the deeply held medieval conviction that truth is universal in its own right. By this he meant that although various expressions of truth bear the marks of their local origins, truth itself, both speculative and practical, is not true just for certain individuals, for certain groups, or nations or civilizations. Rather, truth belongs to mankind as a whole.¹⁴

Gilson used Paris, the center of philosophical and theological studies during the Middle Ages, to illustrate this point. Although the University of Paris exerted a French influence universally felt during the thirteenth century when it reigned supreme, not a single one of its famous professors was French. Alexander of Hales and Roger Bacon were Englishmen; Albertus Magnus a German, Saints Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas were Italians, Siger of Brabant a Belgian, and Dun Scotus was a Scotsman. France became the main European center of studies not because the French genius created learning, but because France had received it from the Greeks and felt the obligation to pass it on to other nations just as they had received it.

The key difference between our medieval ancestors and us, Gilson posited, rests in their conviction that there was an order of absolute religious truth, of ethical goodness, of political and social justice to which differences had to submit and by which they had to be judged. The medievals may have been members of various political and racial groups but they felt themselves members of the same Church and citizens in a temporal community whose boundaries were coextensive with

¹² Ibid., p. 34.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Étienne Gilson, *Medieval Universalism and its Present Value* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1937; repr. New York & London: Sheed & Ward, 1937), pp. 194–215. References are to its reprint in *The Wisdom of Catholicism*, ed., with an introd. and notes, Anton C. Pegis (New York: Random House, 1949), pp. 966–983; see p. 966.

those of the Christian faith. Two Christians could always meet on the same metaphysical and moral ground where no national considerations could ever interfere with such questions:

[V]iewing themselves as members of the same spiritual family, using a common language to impart to others the same fundamental truth, the medieval scholars succeeded in living and working together for about three centuries, and so long as they did there was in the world, together with a vivid feeling for the universal character of truth, some sort at least of Occidental unity.¹⁵

By no means did Gilson advocate going back a thousand years in time to some golden age, or slowing the progress of science, or renouncing social reforms, or abdicating the quest to create something better than that which is. He maintained that we “accept our own times, with the firm conviction that just as much good can be done today as at any time in the past, provided only that we have the will and find the way to do it.”¹⁶ Gilson also denied that the current lack of religious unity “unavoidably condemns the modern world to live in a state of complete dispersion, both in the moral and intellectual order.”¹⁷ Although medieval unity had been a unity of a common faith, it was at the same time something else – something related and even rooted in faith but distinct from it.

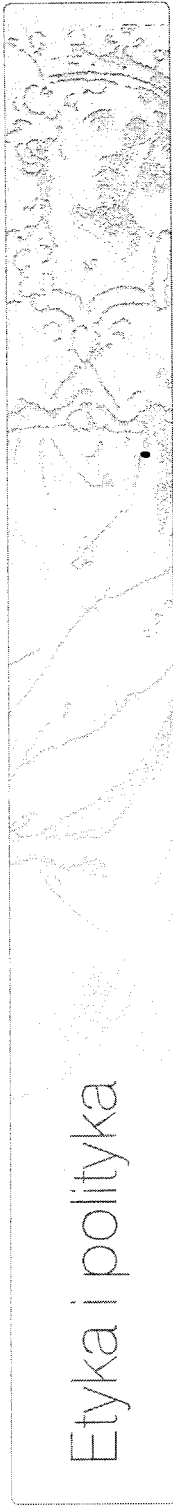
The issue revolved around the difficult question of how to universalize Christian faith. Since faith is not universal because it cannot be demonstrated logically or proved, the only hope was to make it at least acceptable to reason. This important point explains the strong emphasis medieval theologians placed on the rational aspects of religious truth, as well as on the universal character of rational truth itself. They were all convinced that since there was a philosophical, moral, and scientific truth it had to be the same for all races and nations. While Gilson relegated the problem of religious unity to the theologians, he categorized the problem of philosophical unity as an essentially philosophical problem to be solved by philosophers – unless they want someone else to do it for, and probably against, them. Losing a common faith is one thing but after losing a common philosophy the great danger is to lose even our common science and exchange it for state-controlled dogmas.

Gilson argued that the only conceivable protection against encroachments of the totalitarian state rests in a powerful revival of the notion of

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 975

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 976.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*



the universal character of truth. The future of the mind and its liberty hangs in the balance:

[A]s soon as men refuse to be ruled by God, they condemn themselves to be ruled directly by man; and if they decline to receive from God the leading principles of their moral and social conduct, they are bound to accept them from the king, or from the state, or from their race, or from their own social class. In all cases, there will be a state-decreed philosophical, moral, historical, and even scientific truth, just as tyrannical in its pretensions, and much more effective in its oppressions of individual conscience, than any state religion may have ever been in the past.¹⁸

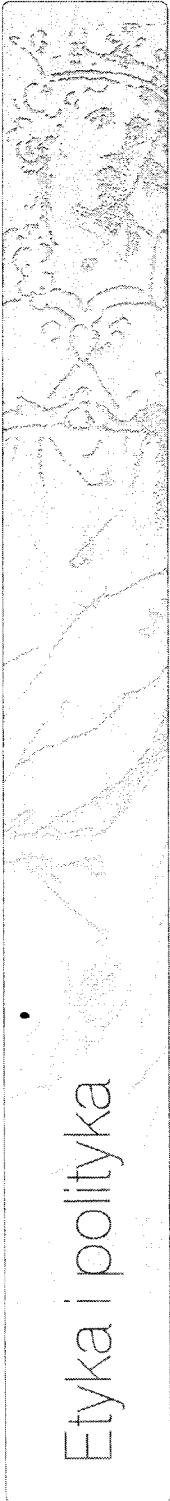
The revival Gilson advocated to remedy this situation maintained a rationalism as the only sound form of philosophy. By this Gilson meant that there is no unifying force above reason. Feeling, intuition (be it aesthetical or metaphysical), the will and its passions, desires, or interests may ground philosophy but only in an obscure force whose self assertion is its only possible justification. Whereas feeling, intuition, and the will are always one's feeling, intuition or will, the only thing in the natural order that is unconditionally neither yours nor mine is reason.

For Gilson, "[e]very sound rationalism is at the same time a realism."¹⁹ The proper use of reason is to judge things according to what they are. Idealism considers itself justified in prescribing what reality should be, with the common danger of establishing one's own individual truth as a valid universal dogma. Realism, on the other hand, maintains that the human mind is right when it conforms to reality. Once we decide to free the human mind to prescribe its own law to things, idealism under the pretense of liberating the mind from those things enslaves it to itself. This is why we have various and contradictory scientific interpretations of the world today and why each philosopher has his own system.²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 978. See Tom Wolfe, *Back to Blood* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2012), p. 22: "Religion is dying but everybody still has to believe in *something*. It would be intolerable - you couldn't stand it - to finally have to say to yourself, 'Why keep pretending? I am nothing but a random atom inside a supercollider known as the universe.' But believing in by definition means *blindly, irrationally*, doesn't it? So my people, that leaves only our blood, the bloodlines that course through our very bodies to unite us. 'La Raza!' as the Puerto Ricans cry out. 'The Race!' cries the whole world. All people, all people everywhere, have but one last thing on their minds - *Back to blood!*"

¹⁹ Gilson, *Medieval Universalism and its Present Value*, p. 980.

²⁰ Gilson's characterization fits the postmodernist movement exported from France in the late 1960s and early 1970s. With its highly critical epistemology conveyed by French masters writing in an *avant-garde* manner, it argued that: truth is always relative to different viewpoints and all conceptual systems are prone to falsifying, distorting, hierarchization and, therefore, one can never attain truth in philosophy, history, politics, or even the empirical sciences; the language of literary texts acts independently of any supposed intentions of their author; ultimately a culture is left with competing stories whose effectiveness depends not so much on



Instead of experiencing Sartre's nausea at the sight of the world, the medievals found in it order and beauty. They did not consider man as condemned to absurd freedom when he read in his own heart the laws of practical reasoning. Unlike Einstein who considered the harmony of thought and reality an incomprehensible mystery,²¹ the medieval philosopher knew God's existence as the source of both knowledge and reality, and understood liberty for created man as consisting in regulating the will according to reason and reason itself according to the divine law.

Gilson attributed modern philosophers disagreeing to their being idealists of one sort or another. Only the recognition of an independent reality upon the existence and nature of which they can agree can reconcile different human minds. There may have been philosophical differences in the thirteenth century but there was common agreement on a number of fundamental doctrines because all the philosophers admitted an order of things which they tried to express. The medievals all tried to express the same reality whereas idealists express only their minds. Gilson's assessment holds true of more recent thought which he did not have the opportunity to know – for example, the absolute relativism that permeates much of philosophy today. For many contemporary philosophers, any universal truth is impossible; relativism is our fate because truth itself is always relative to the differing standpoints and predisposing intellectual framework of the judging subject. Gilson concluded that we have as many philosophies as we have minds, and then added “we have so many philosophies and so few minds” because a mind that feeds upon itself is empty.²²

Gilson understood true freedom of mind as a complete liberation from our personal prejudices and in our complete yielding to the teaching of facts. “Either we shall be free from things, and slaves to our minds, or free from our minds because submitted to things. Realism always was and remains the source of our personal liberty. Let us add that, for the same reason, it remains the only guarantee of our social liberty.”²³

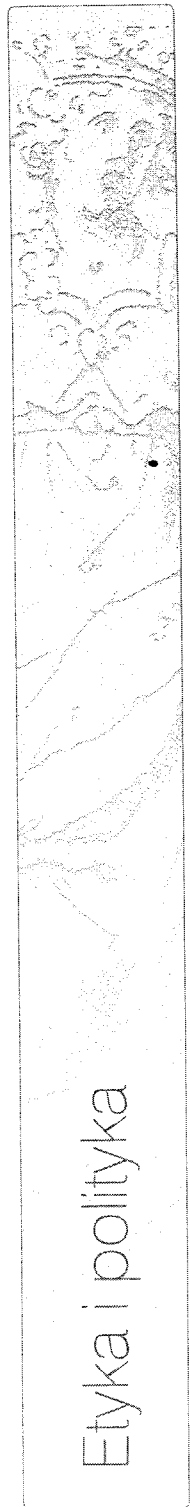
Finally, the last and important feature of medieval philosophy, according to Gilson, was its personalism. Our bodies make us individuals

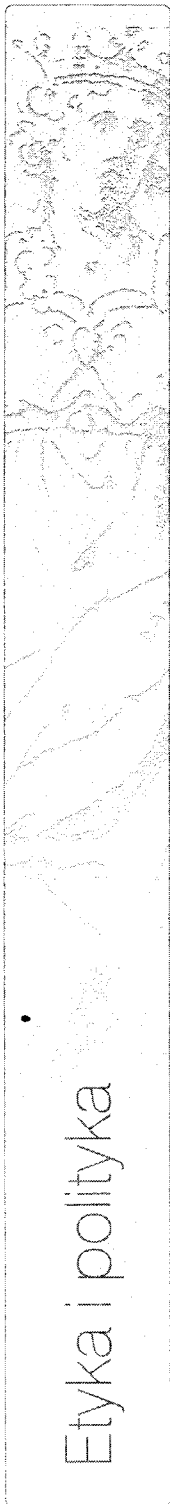
an independent standard of judgment as upon their appeal to the communities in which they circulate. See Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

²¹ See Albert Einstein, *Physik und Realität* (Paris: [s.n.], 1938).

²² Gilson, *Medieval Universalism and its Present Value*, p. 981. We have reached the point when today one can speak of terrorist philosophical language. As John Searle wrote, “Michel Foucault once characterized Derrida's prose style to me as ‘*obscuratisme terroriste*’. The text is written so obscurely that you can't figure out exactly what the thesis is (hence ‘*obscuratisme*’) and then when one criticizes this, the author says, ‘*Vous m'avez mal compris; vous êtes idiot*’ (hence ‘*terroriste*’).” (“The World Turned Upside Down,” *The New York Review of Books* 30 (October 27, 1983), pp. 74–79).

²³ Gilson, *Medieval Universalism and its Present Value*, p. 982.





and distinct from one another, with our individualism being the source of divisions and oppositions. "When men consider themselves as mere individuals then so called Liberalism is bound to prevail, until political disorders and social injustice make it unavoidable for the State to become totalitarian."²⁴ For Gilson, a group of individuals is nothing more than a herd whereas a group of persons is a people. Our bodies make us individuals, but we are persons because of our intellect. Man, an individual engaged in a group, is also a person endowed with intelligence and, therefore, engaged outside and beyond that group. The medievals understood that our intellectual knowledge is strictly personal and entirely universal. Every person is an original source of knowledge and of free determinations and, at the same time, because our knowledge is rational it is universal in its own right. Human reasons and wills are bound to agree with one another to the extent that every one remains true to their own nature which is to be rational. On this account, truth, morality, social justice, and beauty are necessary and universal in their own right.

Rationalism, realism, personalism, and the philosophical search for truth universal in its own right make up the foundations of medieval universalism and its revival so needed today. Gilson remained convinced that only such a revival could safeguard man against totalitarianism for the very root of our intellectual and social liberty lies in the conviction that there is nothing in the world above universal truth:

Our only hope is therefore in a widely spread revival of the Greek and medieval principle, that truth, morality, social justice, and beauty are necessary and universal in their own right. Should philosophers, scientists, artists make up their minds to teach that principle and if necessary to preach it in time and out of time, it would become known again that there is a spiritual order of realities whose absolute right it is to judge even the State, and eventually to free us from its oppression.²⁵

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In his historical studies of philosophy in the Middle Ages, Gilson demonstrated how medieval universalism expressed itself in a rich philosophical pluralism, not a bland philosophical uniformity. Gilson

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

discovered and grew to appreciate the profundity of one particular form of this pluralism, i.e., the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas and for decades championed Thomism as the best means to counteract past philosophical errors while being open to the advances of his own age. When discussing the revival in France of the philosophy of St. Thomas, Gilson cited the life and work of his colleague Jacques Maritain as effectively making Thomism acceptable to artists, poets, dramatists, etc., while also contributing to contemporary social and political thought.²⁶ Giants of the stature of Gilson and Maritain may not be apparent on the immediate philosophical horizon, but much excellent work on St. Thomas continues to be realized. That Thomism now exists in a *diaspora* having moved beyond Catholic institutions into not only Protestant but secular institutions clearly indicates that without the help of any official sanction the tradition can stand on its own two feet. Familiarity with the history of St. Thomas' thought leaves us not simply with hope but with a solid, realistic optimism regarding its revival:

Aquinas has continually had his ups and downs, with euphoria in the early fourteenth century at the time of his canonization, and later at the use made of him in the sixteenth century at the Council of Trent, and then through the Leonine encyclical in the nineteenth century. After each of these bursts of attention he receded to a much lower level of notice. There is no reason to think that this alternating history will not be continued.²⁷

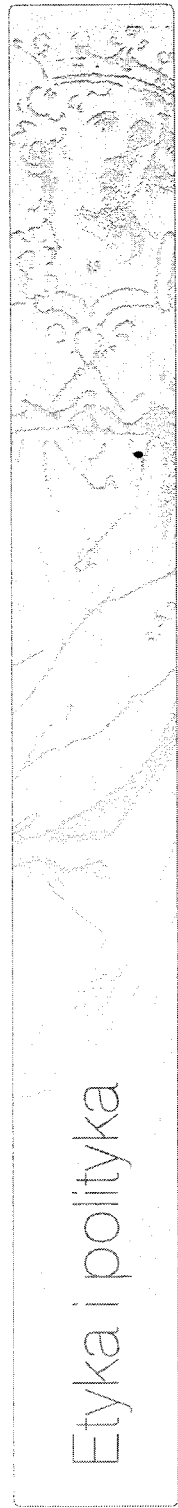
Terror, totalitaryzm i filozofia

Streszczenie

W swym unikalnym i profetycznym eseju Gilson wiąże współczesne nieszczęścia ludzkości z odwróceniem się oraz porzuceniem Boga i rozumu. Jeśli Bóg umarł, to człowiek może powiedzieć lub zrobić wszystko. Jednak taki człowiek, według Gilsona, nie jest prawdziwie wolny. Nie jest wolny od innych ludzi, nie jest też chroniony przed nimi przez Boga i Boże prawo. Państwa totalitarne są pełne ludzi oczekujących, że o ich losach będą decydować ludzie bogaci i wpływowi. Gilson proponuje antidotum na taki stan, ożywiając średniowieczne przekonanie, że prawda jest sama w sobie powszechna. Jest absolutną wartością, jak absolutna dobroć moralna i absolutna sprawiedliwość polityczna i społeczna, którym wszyscy muszą się podporządkować i w świetle których wszyscy muszą być sądzeni.

²⁶ See Shook, *Etienne Gilson*, p. 266.

²⁷ Joseph Owens, "Neo-Thomism and Christian Philosophy," in *Thomistic Papers: VI*, ed. John F. X. Knasas (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1994), p. 51.



Etyka i polityka