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ARE THERE MANY PHILOSOPHIES OR IS THERE JUST 'DOING PHILOSOPHY'?

Richard Sofatzis

1. Introduction

'All men by nature desire to know.' – Aristotle.¹

Aristotle's famous declaration of the universal pursuit of knowledge attests to the truth that knowing, thinking and philosophising are capacities that all humans hold in common.² But is the nature of this common pursuit one of unity or plurality: are there many philosophies or is there 'just doing philosophy'? Can both of these propositions stand simultaneously, or does admitting one exclude the other? In this essay, I will initially outline that the term *philosophy* can be used in various senses: firstly, corresponding to the subjective act of philosophising and, secondly, to systems of thought which are judged against an objective criterion, reality itself. Then, by acknowledging that human thinking follows common principles, we will establish that true philosophy must form a unity. We conclude that there are many partially true philosophies, but only one authentic way doing of 'doing philosophy'. 'Doing philosophy' proceeds from common and immutable principles and reflects the unity of truth itself.

2. *Philosophy*: one term, multiple senses

2.1 *Conceptual analysis*

The meaning of the term *philosophy* is foundational in determining whether there are many philosophies or whether there is just 'doing philosophy'. Philosophy, from the Greek φίλος (*philos*/love) and σοφία (*sophia*/wisdom), is often thus defined from its etymological roots as the love or pursuit of wisdom.³ Yet philosophy may also be considered as a system of

¹ The opening sentence to Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, as quoted/translated by McInerny, 11; Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics, Volume I: Books 1-9*, trans. Hugh Tredennick, Loeb Classical Library 271 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), 3, <https://doi.org/10.4159/DLCL.aristotle-metaphysics.1933>.

² Cf. McInerny, *A Student's Guide to Philosophy*, 14–15.

³ Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics, Volume I: Books 1-9*, 3–13. Here Aristotle speaks of man's desire to know and the highest form of knowledge being wisdom. He then associates this with the term 'philosopher'. According to Aquinas, Pythagoras was the first to call 'himself a philosopher, i.e., a lover of wisdom.' Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, trans. John Patrick Rowan, The Collected Works of St. Thomas Aquinas (Charlottesville, Va: InteLex Corporation, 1993), 24, <http://pm.nlx.com.ipacez.nd.edu.au/xtf/view?docId=aquinas/aquinas.35.xml>; Richard E. Creel, *Thinking Philosophically: An Introduction to Critical Reflection and Rational Dialogue* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 15, 20–21, 35; Ralph M. McInerny, *Thomism in an Age of Renewal* (Notre Dame, Ill: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 108.

thought, that is ‘a philosophy’ or ‘a philosophical theory’.⁴ While the first sense is implied by the phrase ‘just doing philosophy’, ‘there are many philosophies’ implies the second. I will argue that these positions are not necessarily contradictory, for one refers to a human action/practice, whereas the other refers to the result of the action/practice, namely the production of a system of thought. Therefore, the term ‘philosophy’ can be used in multiple senses, such that the two propositions of the question at hand should not be considered mutually exclusive without further clarification or qualification.

2.1 Philosophy as a subjective activity

Having established that there exist various senses of the term *philosophy*, it is now fitting to consider the reasons for this. Ralph McInerny points out that doing philosophy is a subjective activity, that is, it is an activity undertaken by a subject (a person) – let us designate this by the term *philosophising*.⁵ History irrefutably demonstrates that, just as many individuals philosophise, their philosophical thought is frequently incongruent with each another – whether partially or wholly.⁶ A multiplicity of philosophical theories abounds, and, by the second sense of philosophy discussed above, many philosophies.⁷ Therefore, reflecting on the propositions of our question in connection with the two senses of *philosophy* that have been developed, it is the case that while one can ‘just do philosophy’ in the pursuit of wisdom, on account of its inherent subjectivity, the result of history is that many people adhere to disparate philosophies.

2.2 Philosophy as autonomous and objective

Having considered the subjective nature of philosophising, we shall now examine that in another sense philosophy is ‘autonomous and objective’.⁸ At the outset of his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle identifies that philosophy seeks knowledge of ultimate causes and principles.⁹ Thomas

⁴ Frederick C. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. I: Greece and Rome (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1946), 2–3; Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1938), 307; Cf. McInerny, *Thomism in an Age of Renewal*, 111.

⁵ McInerny, *Thomism in an Age of Renewal*, 107, 111; Cf. Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, 325.

⁶ Aristotle demonstrated this in his outline of the various prior theories regarding the causes of things. Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics, Volume I: Books 1-9*, 17–43; Similarly, cf. Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, 31–61; McInerny also demonstrates this with respect to the modern era of philosophy, cf. McInerny, *A Student's Guide to Philosophy*, 8–9, 19–26.

⁷ Cf. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, I: Greece and Rome:2–7; McInerny, *A Student's Guide to Philosophy*, 52.

⁸ McInerny, *Thomism in an Age of Renewal*, 106.

⁹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics, Volume I: Books 1-9*, 13; Jacques Maritain, *An Introduction to Philosophy*, trans. E. I. Watkin (London: Sheed & Ward, 1930), 81.

Aquinas, commenting on a later passage of the same work, posits that 'knowing attains its completion as a result of the likeness of the thing known existing in the knowing subject',¹⁰ and thus, we derive the criterion for all knowledge: *reality*.¹¹ Therefore, since philosophy seeks knowledge, *reality* is equally the criterion for philosophy: all philosophical systems can be evaluated according to how well they are able strike the target of what is real.¹² In a sentence, philosophy seeks not mere opinion but knowledge of the very way things are.¹³ And, thus, we are at the cusp of the conflict residing in our question: objective knowledge verses subjective thought.

3. Uniting subjectivity and objectivity

3.1 Universal principles

In view of the tension between objective knowledge and subjective thought, it behoves us to first consider how the two might be compatible. The task of the philosopher, according to Etienne Gilson, is 'to relate reality, as we know it, to the permanent principles in whose light all the changing problems of science, of ethics and of art have to be solved.'¹⁴ Indeed, human reasoning obeys fundamental laws, the immutable and common principles of reason: it is only through these that we can seek the truth: thought in accord with reality.¹⁵ We can infer from our previous discussion that human thinking is the requisite activity for him who loves and pursues wisdom,¹⁶ the result being his system of thought.¹⁷ On these grounds, there is only one way of doing philosophy: to adhere to the immutable and common principles of the human mind in the

¹⁰ Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, 481–82.

¹¹ McInerney, *Thomism in an Age of Renewal*, 106; Cf. John A. Creaven, 'Personalism, Thomism and Epistemology', *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 8, no. 1 (1945): 8–12, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tho.1945.0000>.

¹² Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackman, Loeb Classical Library 73 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), 5, 325, https://doi.org/10.4159/DLCL.aristotle-nicomachean_ethics.1926. Aristotle's analogy of hitting a target with respect to virtue in this sense similarly applies towards attainment of truth. For example, one aspect of reality or one point of view must not be stressed out of proportion with the rest of reality, lest the arrow deviate from what is the true centre.

¹³ Emmanuel Chapman, 'Living Thomism', *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 4, no. 3 (1942): 369, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tho.1942.0019>.

¹⁴ Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, 324.

¹⁵ In particular, the principle of non-contradiction expressed in its various forms. Aristotle, *Metaphysics, Volume I: Books 1-9*, 161–63, 169, 179; Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, 242, 248; McInerney, *A Student's Guide to Philosophy*, 52; Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, 320, 324; Peter Adamson, *God Only Knows: Aristotle on Mind and God*, *History of Philosophy without Any Gaps*, 2:45-3:45, accessed 15 March 2018, <https://www.historyofphilosophy.net/aristotle-mind-god>.

¹⁶ Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics, Volume I: Books 1-9*, 9; Maritain, *An Introduction to Philosophy*, xiii.

¹⁷ As previously discussed. Here we refer only to Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, 307.

search for truth. Thus, the common principles are the means of compatibility between subjective thought and objective knowledge – between doing philosophy and philosophy itself.

3.2 *The unity of true philosophy*

If doing philosophy is to use the common principles to seek out what is true, then what do these principles reveal about the truth of philosophical conclusions? Let us consider the principle of non-contradiction: it is ‘impossible for a thing both to be and not be at the same time’.¹⁸ More than simply a principle isolated to exterior reality or existence, this first principle also finds a consequent expression in the realm of subjective thought: truth claims cannot contradict each other unless, of course, one is false.¹⁹ Regarding other conflicts that seem to exist, deeper examination reveals these as merely apparent; real conflict cannot exist within the truth.²⁰ Where there is truth, there is a consistency and harmony between the claims, not disagreement.²¹ This harmony is what Pope John Paul II calls ‘the unity of truth’.²² Therefore, philosophical thought that remains obedient to common principles has unity as its hallmark. Similarly, all philosophical thought that is true participates in a unity. Thus, while history shows there are many philosophical theories and systems, all philosophical thought that is true participates in a unity without contradiction.

Having shown that true philosophy has the mark of unity, we will now consider whether this can be reconciled with the existence of diverse philosophical theories, each of which claims to possess the truth. A branch of philosophical thought, or even a whole system, may be only a partial and imperfect view of reality: in as far as humanity can add to, perfect and deepen its knowledge of the world, no philosophical effort holds the truth in all its fullness.²³ In another respect, that philosophical theories disagree does not deny the possibility that a theory can

¹⁸ The First Principle of Demonstration (also known as the Principle of Non-Contradiction), following the wording of Aristotle in Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, 241–43, 793; Aristotle, *Metaphysics, Volume I: Books 1-9*, 161.

¹⁹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics, Volume I: Books 1-9*, 199; cf. Paul Glenn J., *An Introduction to Philosophy* (St Louis, MO.: B. Herder Book Co., 1944), 19.

²⁰ Glenn, *An Introduction to Philosophy*, 19; J. M. Bochenski, *Philosophy, An Introduction*, trans. William Newell M. (Holland: D. Reidel Pub. Co., 1962), 44.

²¹ Glenn, *An Introduction to Philosophy*, 19; Rudolf G. Bantas and J. S. Zybura, *Contemporary Philosophy and Thomistic Principles* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1932), 51.

²² John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, Encyclical Letter (Vatican Website, September 14, 1998), sec. 34, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html.

²³ John Paul II, sec. 4; cf. Glenn, *An Introduction to Philosophy*, 16–18; Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, 116: ‘no man can attain a complete knowledge of the truth’.

possess genuine truth about reality in some regard, albeit contain falsities in other areas.²⁴ In a third respect, even a theory that errs with regards to its principles (and subsequently all conclusions drawn from these), nevertheless cannot exclude every element of truth – for every falsity contains some truth.²⁵ On these grounds, every philosophical theory reflects the truth to some degree, albeit each in a distinct manner. Therefore, there is a unity of true philosophy to be sought by synthesising what is true within the systems, which at the same time is open to further knowledge. Thus, referring back to our overarching question, there are indeed many *partially* true philosophies, each participating in a unity in so far as it is true.²⁶

3.3 The Thomistic synthesis

As a case in point, a unity of true philosophy is precisely what Aquinas sought to achieve. Far from casting out, in totality, the thought of a philosopher that may have contained some error, Aquinas derived the truth from all who possessed it and built on it with his own unique contributions.²⁷ J. S. Zybura describes Aquinas' achievement as 'a true philosophical synthesis', that is, 'a substantial union of established philosophical truth, not merely a mechanical juxtaposition of similar doctrines'.²⁸ Aquinas' achievement derives from his assiduous methodology of testing, purifying and developing truth claims according to reason and human experience, adhering to and guided by the common principles.²⁹ Aquinas' account is driven by the conviction that we experience the world through our senses in such a way that it is intelligible, and from this we can understand its order.³⁰ Despite this assumption, it suffices to say that, whatever one takes as his convictions, true philosophy must obey fundamental laws of reasoning.

²⁴ Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, 115.

²⁵ Glenn, *An Introduction to Philosophy*, 17.

²⁶ Here the phrase 'partially true philosophy' groups together the various senses of partial as elaborated: true but incomplete; true in some conclusions and false in others; false in all its conclusions. The third class may still be called *partial* on the grounds that every falsehood contains some truth, but to be clear, a half-truth is nevertheless a whole-falsehood. Thus, I propose that this third sense only participates in a unity of truth analogously – as a spark towards the formulation of truth. Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics, Volume I: Books 1-9*, 85; Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, 119.

²⁷ Bandas and Zybura, *Contemporary Philosophy and Thomistic Principles*, 5–8.

²⁸ Bandas and Zybura, 7, 5–6. Zybura authored this section (the introduction) of the book.

²⁹ Bandas and Zybura, 5–6, 8.

³⁰ Bochenski, *Philosophy, An Introduction*, 36–37; Ralph M. McInerny, *A First Glance at St. Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, Ill: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), ix.

3.4 Reality: the source of unity

I would like to take the case study of Aquinas further to put forward, to the best of my understanding, a deeper argument for the unity of philosophy. As referred to above, Aquinas' philosophy is based on the assumption that we experience the world through our senses in such a way that we have the ability to authentically know it through our concepts.³¹ The principle of identity, 'a thing is what it is', attests to Aristotle's observation that reality shows itself to be composed of identities, that is, of individuals.³² For us to know anything of these individuals, they must, of themselves, be intelligible, having predicates/properties that distinguish them from other things.³³ Aquinas also adheres to the principle of sufficient reason, namely, that everything has a cause that gives it order and existence.³⁴ Since there cannot be an infinite regress of causes, lest there be no explanation at all, there must be a terminating cause, a first cause, that is responsible for the existence and ordering of every individual substance.³⁵ On this basis, reality is a community of individuals which are unified and ordered by the first cause.³⁶ And hence, in so far as philosophy is about ascertaining the various truths of this united and ordered community, the resultant thoughts about it, if they are true, will likewise possess the order, unity and inter-relationship of reality itself. Thus, if we accept Aquinas' assumptions, in addition to the argument of the unity of truth, another ground from which we argue for a synthesis of true philosophy is the unified ordering of reality.

4. How to avoid 'doing philosophy'

4.1 Simple adherence to a system

Having established the clear possibility that subjective thought and objective reality can harmonise, we ought now to consider how a philosopher might put the two in opposition to

³¹ Bochenski, *Philosophy, An Introduction*, 36–37; McInerny, *A First Glance at St. Thomas Aquinas*, ix.

³² Dennis Q. McInerny, *Being Logical: A Guide to Good Thinking*, Trade paperback ed (New York: Random House, 2005), 26; cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics, Volume I: Books 1-9*, 161.

³³ Cf. Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, 216.

³⁴ McInerny, *Being Logical*, 27; Bandas and Zybur, *Contemporary Philosophy and Thomistic Principles*, 68–69.

³⁵ Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, 908, 920–21, 925.

³⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics, Volume II: Books 10-14*, trans. Hugh Tredennick and G. Cyril Armstrong, Loeb Classical Library 287 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935), 123, 167–69, 173–75, <https://doi.org/10.4159/DLCL.aristotle-metaphysics.1933>; Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. P. H. Wicksteed and F. M. Cornford, Loeb Classical Library 228 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934), 23, 31, <https://doi.org/10.4159/DLCL.aristotle-physics.1957>; Cf. Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, 854, 920, 925. Aquinas aptly puts it thus: 'the whole universe is like one principality and one kingdom, and must therefore be governed by one ruler.'

each other. In his explanation of why he is a Thomist, it may appear strikingly unusual that McInerny claims that 'Thomas... was not a Thomist.'³⁷ His justification is that 'what [Thomas] was engaged in was not a *kind* of philosophy. [He] simply did philosophy.'³⁸ Gilson explains that Thomas 'had no system in the idealistic sense of the word,' nor did he intend to 'achieve a system of the world as if being could be deduced from thought.'³⁹ Thus, adherence to a system of thought, whether it be any one of the many philosophical theories, is not in itself required to do philosophy – one may even blindly follow the mistakes of another by doing this. Rather, one adheres to a philosophical system in a secondary sense if it aligns with one's own doing of philosophy. It can only be in this secondary sense, and insofar as he considers Thomas an exemplar for doing philosophy, that McInerny himself takes the label *Thomist*. With Aquinas as its embodiment, Thomism, then, gives our overarching question a practical answer: a Thomist 'just does philosophy', restrained not by any postulate of Aquinas (or of anyone else for that matter) but only by reality itself and the fundamental rules regarding how we must think about reality.

4.2 Un-philosophical 'philosophy'

While we have seen that blind adherence to a philosophical system fuels conflict between thought and reality, there is a fundamental basis behind the multiplicity of philosophical systems that people adhere to. Just as Aquinas argues that things 'sometimes fail in their proper natural activity', for which 'order is lacking', being subjected to 'things which are contrary to their nature', so too human reason itself fails in its proper activity when it deviates from the common principles of reality.⁴⁰ Acting thus – against reason – is contrary to any concept of doing philosophy, yet in the history of philosophy, this is all too common, such that Gilson remarks, 'What passed by its name was almost always something else'.⁴¹ Therefore, since we have previously demonstrated that doing philosophy proceeds from the common principles of reality in order to arrive at the truth, and not in the simple adherence to philosophical system disconnected from these principles, we further reiterate that nor does it

³⁷ McInerny, *A Student's Guide to Philosophy*, 51–52.

³⁸ McInerny, 52.

³⁹ Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, 324, cf 308-9.

⁴⁰ Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, 921; Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, 321–23; McInerny, *Being Logical*, 29.

⁴¹ Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, 324–25; This is particularly true of many modern philosophers, cf. Mortimer J. Adler, *Ten Philosophical Mistakes* (New York; Macmillan, 1985), 198; Chapman, 'Living Thomism', 374. A name may be transferred from the true to the false because of a superficial likeness; for example, pyrite or 'fool's gold' is often mistakenly called gold.

consist in deviating from these principles – this is to act against reason: it is not doing philosophy! This wholly *un*-philosophical act is where the conflict between objective reality and subjective thought derives – with true philosophy there is no conflict.

5. Conclusion

Recapitulating our argumentation, we first saw that the term *philosophy* may be used in more than one sense to refer to both the subjective human activity of ‘doing philosophy’ and its result, namely the production of systems of thought – philosophical theories – which history demonstrates as many and various. Having concluded that there is only one way of doing philosophy, proceeding from the common principles of the human mind in the search for truth of what is real, we saw that the mark of true philosophy is unity. Since diverse theories can nevertheless possess the truth partially, a unity of true philosophy may be sought from what seems disparate: Aquinas embodies this effort towards synthesis, convinced that reality is unified and ordered. We set aside any notion that doing philosophy acts against reason or simply adheres to a system of thought, for this is to disconnect from these principles. Therefore, our conclusion is this: whilst there are various partially true philosophies, there is, properly speaking, only one overarching way of participating in a unity of true philosophy: obeying the fundamental laws of reason in search for the unifying and ordering truth about reality – and this is what we call ‘just doing philosophy’. ‘Just doing philosophy’ is what Thomism embodies, and it is on this basis that not only McInerny, but indeed this author also, calls himself a Thomist.

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