

## Comment:

### *Origins of Analytical Philosophy*

Everybody is a philosopher, so Pope John Paul II says in the encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (cf. §30). ‘The quest for meaning which has always compelled the human heart’ (§1) is articulated in literature, music, painting, sculpture, architecture and other works of creative intelligence (§24). And there is also ‘the sometimes ephemeral teachings of professional philosophers’ (§30).

The Pope refers, of course, to Plato and Aristotle. He relates them to Homer and to Euripides and Sophocles, as Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger did, and as a few modern philosophers have done, such as Bernard Williams and Martha Nussbaum. More adventurously, he places Western philosophy in the context of the sacred writings of ancient Israel, the Veda and the Avesta, of Confucius and Lao Tzu (Tze in the encyclical: presumably the genitive case?), together with the preaching of the Tirthankaras and of the Buddha (§1).

The anonymous translator of the official Libreria Editrice Vaticana text seems to think Tirthankara was an individual. He skips the word ‘viorum’, the plural ending of which should have alerted him. The Tirthankaras (‘crossing-makers’) are the twenty-four great teachers in Jainism, as every schoolboy knows, the last of whom died in the sixth century BC.

As far as recent academic philosophy is concerned, the Pope names no names. Where it has gone wrong he has in mind atheistic humanism, scientific positivism and nihilism (§46). Where there is much to admire — studies of ‘perception and experience, of the imaginary and the unconscious, of personhood and intersubjectivity, of freedom and values, of time and history’ (§48) — the agenda sounds equally ‘Continental’: phenomenology, Lacan (*l’imaginaire*), personalism, Habermas, Heidegger, Gadamer etc. What has been happening in English-speaking philosophy for the last hundred years is, it seems, of little interest.

The encyclical does not recommend, let alone reimpose, the study of Thomism. Nevertheless, Saint Thomas remains the model for all who seek the truth (§78).

Funnily enough, English-speaking philosophy owes a great deal to Thomism, though neither Thomists nor analytical philosophers realize this. Analytical philosophers regard Thomism as an ideology, on a par with Marxism. Thomists, on the other hand, dismiss ‘linguistic analysis’, ‘ordinary language philosophy’, ‘Oxford philosophy’ etc., as

merely talk about talk — Marxists did likewise.

This was never fair. In his classic paper ‘A Plea for Excuses’ (1956), for example, a scrupulous examination of the kind of thing that we say when excusing ourselves, J.L. Austin, the model linguistic analyst, contributes, as he says, to an examination of the central philosophical topics of freedom and responsibility. Attending to what we say is only one way of proceeding, he insists, justifying it (however) on the grounds that ‘our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the connections they have found worth marking, in the lifetime of many generations’. In short, we can learn important things about freedom and responsibility by attending to the wisdom embodied in our language. As Austin concludes, this is ‘not *merely* looking at words ... but also at the realities we use words to talk about’.

‘Revolution in Philosophy’, the title of a series of BBC broadcasts given in 1956, encouraged people to regard ‘Oxford philosophy’ as unprecedented, a creation *ex nihilo*, like Melchizedek, without father or mother, arrogantly dismissing other ways of practising philosophy. Recently, however, studies by well known Anglo-American philosophers tell a different and quite fascinating story.

Michael Dummett, one of the most eminent Oxford philosophers, in *Origins of Analytical Philosophy* (1993), ascribes a key role to Gottlob Frege (1848–1925), ‘the grandfather of analytic philosophy’; but he highlights Bolzano and Brentano, just as significant (he argues) in the ‘Continental’ as in the ‘Anglo-American’ traditions.

Interestingly, Bernard Bolzano (1781–1848) and Franz Brentano (1838–1917) were once Catholic priests. Bolzano was in at the beginning of the revival of Thomism; Brentano was seminary-trained in the first flush of resurgent Thomism. Brentano was the principal influence on Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) and thus on the phenomenological tradition. He also influenced G.F. Stout (1860–1944), the Cambridge philosopher whose students included G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell.

Bolzano taught that logic is independent of psychology. Brentano retrieved the idea of intentionality. The laws of thought are not the same as how we human beings actually think. When we know something it is the things themselves that we know, not representations of them. These commonplaces of Aristotelian Thomism, highly contestable of course, filtered into the resistance within analytic philosophy to subjectivism, positivism, nihilism etc. — which thus warrants more attention from Catholic philosophers than the preaching of the Tirthankaras

F.K.