

“Introduction” by John Deely, pp. v–xiv, to the 2008 Hildesheim reprint of Joannes a Sancto Thoma, *Cursus Philosophicus Thomisticus*, ed. in 3 volumes by B. Reiser (Turin: Marietti, 1930, 1933, 1937). This introduction is followed by Martin Walter’s “Preface” to the reprint edition, “Einleitende Bemerkungen”, pp. xv–xl.



INTRODUCTORY REMARKS
ON THE VALUE OF POINSOT’S WORK TO PHILOSOPHY TODAY

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The standard histories of philosophy over the whole of the 20th century have tacitly agreed to give the impression that nothing of value or interest happened in the Latin tradition after the death of William of Ockham. I was first led to see the falsity of this standard view by a reading of Jacques Maritain’s writings on sign, published together in his book *Quatre Essais sur l’Esprit dans sa Condition Charnelle* (nouvelle edition revue et augmenté; Paris: Alsatia, 1956). In those writings, Maritain directed me to the *Tractatus de Signis* of John Poinot, then thoroughly embedded within the hefty volumes of Poinot’s *Cursus Philosophicus*.

Mainly interested at the time in the newly developing idea of semiotics as a study of the action of signs, I spent the next fifteen years in preparing Poinot’s semiotics for presentation as an independent edition, which was published in bilingual format by the University of California Press in 1985. Over the course of that work I came to appreciate the value of Poinot’s work not only on the sign, but as a whole. For what the *Cursus Philosophicus* presents us with is nothing less than a careful and complete summation of what philosophy was able to achieve independently and in its own right prior to the advent of science in the modern sense as a complementary intellectual development.

It is true that the period of early modern philosophy approached from its Latin side, rather than from the side of its emergence out of Latin into the national language traditions of classical modern thought, is a dismaying maze of the greatest difficulty to navigate. This is precisely the value of Poinot’s work as a whole.

The 20th century histories of philosophy standard to now are useless when it comes to the later Latin centuries. They simply throw up their hands before the morass of material repetitions of terms (i.e., the constant use of same terms to convey actually different points)¹ and multiplication of abstruse distinctions, and rest content leave their readers without a clue beyond the engrained modern prejudices toward the Latins which became part of the air one breathes after Descartes, one of Poinot’s principal contemporaries, to say the least. Needless to say, the orientation more or less unconsciously provided by such prejudices is not particularly helpful if it is to be a question of attaining a new understanding of the possibilities inherent in the Latin matrix of early modern philosophy, and eventually seeing those possibilities with rinsed eyes in their bearing on the future of thought.

Martin Walter has done a great service to scholarship and philosophy in making available for the 21st century Poinot’s reliable and complete survey of the Latin achievements in philosophy. The Enlightenment

¹ See “The Problem of the ‘Nose of Wax’,” in John Deely, *Four Ages of Understanding. The First Postmodern Survey of Philosophy from Ancient Times to the Turn of the 21st Century* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2001), pp. 369–372. See also 483–484; and additional INDEX entries, p. 943.

idea was that modern science could completely rebuild the edifice of human knowledge. Only gradually did we come to realize that, as Bentham and Peirce put it, “cenoscopy precedes idioscopy” — that is to say, philosophy as a critical reflection based on the reliability of the unaided senses to access reality has a validity of its own which is constantly presupposed by the experimental extension of unaided sense by instruments and the mathematization of those specialized results in constructing the relatively (but not absolutely) autonomous edifice of knowledge scientific in the modern sense.

But modern scientific knowledge and modern philosophy are quite different birds, as the modern centuries have proved. For while science has extended our knowledge of and control over nature in just the manner that Aquinas predicted, modern philosophy with its “epistemology” has rather sought to persuade us that the whole idea of the ancients to know $\tau\omicron\ \acute{\omicron}\nu$ and of the medievals to know *ens reale* was a chimerical quest from the beginning. Kant’s doctrine of reality as *unknowable in itself* was and remains the synthesizing heritage of modern philosophy.

Thus was born the need for an *unfamiliar* guide, unfamiliar in terms of the actual modern development after Descartes as it has led to the situation in which philosophy contemporary with this publication finds itself, but a guide *intimately familiar* with the Latin developments *leading up to* the time of Descartes and the “modern revolution” — for only such a guide could provide us with the full intellectual context of Descartes’ time background to the “turn to the subject”, the “modern revolution”.

Here again is the value of Poinsoot’s work. For it orients us in terms of the intrinsic possibilities of the Latin development, proving that those possibilities are not what Descartes and the moderns have heretofore led us to believe they were. For as far as the history of early modern philosophy goes, it is impossible to study it while leaving out the standard figures, but it is equally impossible to enlarge the early modern context through the Latin sources if we regard them solely from the standpoint to which the standard figures have accustomed us. We need a non-standard figure — a *non-standard primary source* — as a guide, one who knew the whole early modern Latin context, and therefore who knew the Latin development far better than Descartes himself, along with his modern successors.

In particular, with a view to the *postmodern* development, we need a guide who is able to show within the late Latin context an orientation toward a notion of being understood within experience as prior to the categories and to *any* division of being into what is mind-independent and mind-dependent. And here again we confront the value of the work of John Poinsoot, 1589–1644, as an orienting figure and guide. A contemporary of Descartes neglected in the standard histories of the modern period (try finding his name without a search engine), Poinsoot was a central figure of the Latin matrix within which early modern philosophy gestated. To students of the modern mainstream, Poinsoot’s name is, practically speaking, wholly unfamiliar. It sounds French, but is in fact Burgundian, dating back to a long-forgotten time when the Duchy of Burgundy was an independent region. Moreover, the name contains no hint of the fact that the man bearing it was born and raised in the Portuguese city of Lisbon, of Maria, a Portuguese woman of the Garcez family married to Peter Poinsoot, a Viennese gentleman who had journeyed first to Madrid as Secretary to the Archduke Albert the VI, and thence with the Archduke (made Cardinal for the occasion) to Lisbon, where he settled for some years and took Maria Garcez as his wife. The difficulty that Poinsoot is a name and figure unfamiliar to the mavens of early modern philosophy in its classical development is compounded by the further difficulty that no less than

eighteen different versions and variations of his pen name² are required to locate in scholarly sources what has been written about him, here and there, over the centuries since his passing.

In all the variants, counterparts to the English "John" are verified. That his family name, his surname, was "Poinso" is certain. His own later substitution of "a Sancto Thoma" for "Poinso" in religious life has created a number of more or less counter-productive problems (given the way that the modern period of intellectual culture developed in fact), both within and outside the Hispanic milieu where he produced his Latin writings.

Within the world of Hispanic and Latin philosophy, Poinso's work sometimes came to be confused with that of two other authors using the same "nomen religiosum". To remove this confusion, it was necessary to recur to the proper surnames of all three authors, to wit, Buccretius, Sarasetenus, and Poinso.

Outside the Hispanic and Latin milieu, the practice of the substitution of names reflects religious customs and ideological orientations which are at best poorly understood, and which at worst are the objects of hostility and bigotry (such as befell Poinso in the later 20th century among the numerous followers of Etienne Gilson³).

It is thus for good reason that the best contemporary and, I would expect, future work on this author turns to "Poinso" as the one name for John that provides something approaching an invariant reference across all the national language lines of contemporary discussion.

Poinso was completely unknown to Peirce, which is a pity, because Poinso was the first systematically to demonstrate the foundations of logic and knowledge in the sign in just the sense that Peirce thought of logic as semiotic.⁴ Yet their common acquaintance with the Conimbricenses⁵ achieved a common influence in orienting them alike to the problem, as we might put it, of "Thirdness" in nature and culture. But, while Poinso was the first to establish a unified subject matter for semiotic inquiry, and to show how the fabric of experience at all levels is woven of sign relations, the value of his *Cursus Philosophicus* as whole goes far beyond that achievement alone. It preserves and makes accessible to us again the intellectual horizon necessary to recover from the Enlightenment illusion that modern science replaces the need for philosophy.

In these brief introductory remarks, let me simply point out Poinso's credentials as a guide at once credible and reliable within the larger Latin context of thought in Descartes' lifetime, as also in matters of semiotic. Poinso in effect is a commentator on the bearing of late Latin thought toward emergent distinctively late (very late) and *post* modern concerns with discourse both in its contrast with being considered as a mind-independent reality and in its ability to establish the context for understanding reality in that sense.

² Traced in the "Editorial Afterword" to the Deely edition of John Poinso, *Tractatus de Signis. The semiotic of John Poinso* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), p. 423 note 33.

³ See my essay, "Quid Sit Postmodernismus?", in *Postmodernism and Christian Philosophy*, ed. Roman T. Ciapalo (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1997, for the American Maritain Association), 68–96, for a discussion of Gilson's role in the neglect of Poinso's work even among those late moderns interested in the Latin work of Thomas Aquinas, the so-called "Neothomists".

⁴ Poinso was likewise unknown, it would appear, to Heidegger, which is again a pity, in that Poinso's *Tractatus de Signis* was in effect the answer to Heidegger's foundational question of 1930 (in *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit*) concerning the notion of truth as a correspondence of thought with thing (what is the basis of the prior possibility of such a correspondence?), paralleling his seminal inquiry of 1927, opening *Sein und Zeit*, into the notion of being as prior to the categories of logic and *ens reale*, as also to his puzzlement expressed toward the volume's end as to why being appears to the human animal as present-at-hand despite the fact that being ready-to-hand is 'closer' to us 'proximally and for the most part'.

⁵ See Mauricio Beuchot and John Deely, "Common Sources for the Semiotic of Charles Peirce and John Poinso", *The Review of Metaphysics* XCVIII.3 (March, 1995), 539–566.

Between the years 1631 and 1635, as professor of philosophy at the University of Alcalá, then-rival to Salamanca as Spain's greatest center of higher learning, writing under his name in religion, "Joannes a Sancto Thoma", John Poinsoot brought to publication a two-volume treatment of logic and a three-volume treatment of natural philosophy. All of the volumes, except the first in natural philosophy, which was published in Madrid, were published at Alcalá. In 1637–1638 the first general edition of the contents of the original five volumes was published in Rome as nine volumes in a two-part set, wherein the volumes on logic bore their original title of *Ars Logica, Prima et Secunda Pars*, and the volumes on natural philosophy were assigned the common title — whether by Poinsoot or by his publisher we do not know — of *Cursus Philosophicus*. In 1638, in Cologne, this time in three volumes, the second general edition of the contents of the original five volumes was published under the care of Thomas of Sarria. For this second general edition the modifier *Thomisticus* was added, presumably by Sarria, to the Rome title assigned to the treatment of natural philosophy; and the general title so modified was extended to the whole of the work, including the treatment of logic. Thus was born in 1638 the *Cursus Philosophicus Thomisticus* of John Poinsoot, originally authored without that title and published over the years 1631–1635.

In the best modern edition of this work, that of B. Reiser issued in three volumes between 1930 and 1937, the modified general title from Sarria's 1638 second complete edition, *Cursus Philosophicus Thomisticus*, again appears. Reiser's decision on this point is subject to debate, inasmuch as the title in question is not one known to have been assigned by Poinsoot himself (Deely 1985: 399n4).

In favor of Reiser's decision is the negative fact that the title in question appeared well within Poinsoot's lifetime without raising any known objection on his part; and the positive fact that the title is certainly consistent with the attitude of an author reported by an intimate friend and biographer, Didacus Ramirez, to have said, on his deathbed of 17 June 1644, that he had "never, in thirty years, written or taught anything he did not judge to be consonant with truth and conformed with the teaching of the Angelic Doctor".⁶

Mildly against Reiser's decision stands the fact that the author chose *Cursus Theologicus* without the partisan particle *Thomisticus* for the general title of his systematic eight volumes of theological writing, even though such a qualification would be more appropriate to a theological than to a philosophical context and set of volumes.⁷

⁶ "Vita Rmi P. Joannis a Sto Thoma", by Didacus Ramirez, the earliest biography of Poinsoot, originally published at the beginning of the 1645 first posthumous volume (i.e., *Tomus Quartus*) of Poinsoot's *Cursus Theologicus*, and reprinted as Appendix I to Solesmes ed., *Joannes a Sancto Thoma Cursus Theologici Tomus Primus* (Paris: Desclée, 1931), pp. xxv-xliij. Thomas Merton, in his 1951 work, *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, p. 334), well familiar with the traditions and writings in question, gives the opinion that Poinsoot's "most admirable characteristic is the completeness with which he proposed to submerge his own talents and personality in the thought of the Angelic Doctor"; and indeed it is true, as Merton says, that Poinsoot "sought only the pure doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas, which he opposed to the 'eclectic' Thomism of those who, though they may have acquired great names for themselves," — the most telling target of this remark would have to be the reports that Francisco Suarez made of what he alleged to be, almost always incorrectly, the "opinion of St Thomas", in his history-shaping *Disputationes Metaphysicae* of 1597 — "never rivaled the Angelic Doctor himself." But, in contrast most markedly to Etienne Gilson's approach to Aquinas (see again the Deely-Gilson correspondence reported in Deely's 1995 "Quid sit postmodernismus"), Poinsoot did not confine himself to "the words themselves" but to the *logical consequences* of the words *in the way that Thomas had used them*, accommodating even ambivalences in that usage. (No text perhaps better illustrates Poinsoot's care in reaching a consequent on the basis of Aquinas' writings than the text at 225/11–15 in Question 2 of his *Tractatus de Signis*, Book I, though there are many other examples *passim*. Cf. re the example cited, Deely, *Four Ages of Understanding*, pp. 331–341, esp. 334.)

⁷ Cf. Poinsoot's "Tractatus de Approbatione et Auctoritate Doctrinae D. Thomae" of 1637, in Solesmes ed. Volume I, pp. 221–301.

We can only guess, but my guess⁸ would be that the simple title *Cursus Philosophicus*, or even *Cursus Artium*, is what Poinso himself saw as the best general title for the set of volumes, notwithstanding his indubitable concern for their Thomistic lineage. The last title, *Cursus Artium*, in fact, was actually used by Poinso in his 1640 Preface to the second edition of the *Artis Logicae Secunda Pars* (reproduced in the 1985 edition of the *Tractatus de Signis*, p. 35), and also by his first biographer, Didacus Ramirez (1645: xxxvij). A pity that Reiser did not follow this lead, rather than indulge over-much the Neothomist preoccupation with establishing “realism” in the modern sense, as if that had been the whole project of Thomas himself.

In any event, under whatever general title, Poinso's *Cursus Philosophicus* stands as one of the most complete speculative syntheses that we have⁹ of Latin philosophy in its final stage of development as an indigenous, linguistically homogeneous tradition. It stands also as the most complete such work written explicitly from the point of view of the Latin development as it took inspiration from the *opera omnia* of Thomas Aquinas.

Upon completion of his philosophical *Cursus*, Poinso set to work at once on the publication of his *Cursus Theologicus*, an even more massive synthesis of theology in the Latin Age — theology in the sense Aquinas emphasized, as a confessional-based use of human reason in contrast to philosophy as solely experience-based in the sense of experience that transcends confessional divisions. This work originally appeared in eight volumes between 1637 and 1667. The first three volumes were brought to press by Poinso himself, and the remaining five posthumously.¹⁰ These works have considerable philosophical interest in their own right, to be sure, because “theology” in the sense Aquinas tried to establish it *presupposes* and properly never *opposes* the use of philosophical reason.¹¹ But the explicitly theological horizon of the project of these volumes places

⁸ Spelled out in the 1985 Editorial Afterword to Poinso's *Tractatus de Signis*, p. 399 note 5.

⁹ We need to note that Poinso's work presupposes throughout the Aristotelian contrast of speculative with practical thought, where “speculative” refers to what distinguishes human understanding, while “practical” means the extension of that understanding to the realm of objectivity that is the common concern of all animals, human or not — that is to say, the shaping of the environment to constitute a realm of daily living comfortable to the animal type. Perhaps needless to say, then, Poinso's *Cursus Philosophicus*, even in its “application” of logic called “material logic”, remains wholly in the so-called “speculative” order.

¹⁰ Details of the publication history and contents of Poinso's *Cursus Theologicus* can be found in the Latin “Editorum Solesmensium Praefatio” of 1931; they have also been gathered in English in the “Editorial AfterWord” to the 1985 Deely edition of the *Tractatus de Signis*, beginning at 398 note 3.

¹¹ Deely, *Four Ages of Understanding*, p. 298: “It is not that there was no theological reasoning before Aquinas' century. Of course there was. Indeed, more than one of the early patristic writers were skilled practitioners of Greek philosophical concepts, to mention nothing of the speculative genius displayed by Augustine in his *De Trinitate* of the early 5th century. But these writings without practical exception were of an *apologetic and pastoral bent*, which *presupposed* the Christian standpoint in such a way and to such an extent as to virtually deny philosophy any proper autonomy outside the sphere of religious orientation [as is true of the movement called “Christian philosophy” as it developed in late-20th century America]. They were imbued through and through with the spirit of *parti pris*. Taking sides was the name of the game; partisan spirit its elan. Below the intellectual vigor of these writings were the array of ‘practical’ or ‘pastoral’ writings of a strictly ecclesial, liturgical, or sacramental orientation.

“With Aquinas, religious thinking becomes something more than a mere partisan expression and appropriation of ‘pagan philosophy’. Religious thinking, to begin with, was made to respect thinking simply so called; for human understanding was recognized by Aquinas to have a proper autonomy and sphere of exercise, which, if not neutral respecting divine revelation (for Aquinas considered that all truth pointed in the direction of the divine origin of thought and being), was nonetheless not subject to mere dictates of authority either, but only to evidence in the light of which even authority could be countered as abusive. Recognition of and the demanding of respect for the ‘rights of reason’ were what distinguished the religious thinking of Aquinas and made his theology, even though based on and presuppositive of Christian revelation, a ‘science’ which could draw on without distorting the achievements of human understanding in the speculative and practical spheres alike. By distinguishing the proper

detailed discussion of their contents and overall structure outside our present purview. These two syntheses of Latin thought — Poinsoot's *Cursus Philosophicus* of 1631–1635, and his partially posthumous *Cursus Theologicus* edition of 1637–1667 — are simply the two latest and most authoritative presentations of Latin thought at its most advanced stage that are available to us, despite their conspicuous neglect among modern thinkers, including historians. Yet it remains that they are veritable mines of gold for any postmodern effort to retrieve and understand from our own perspective and for our own interests (in the postmodern morning light) what were the achievements of the Latin Age. I have no doubt that that is exactly how Poinsoot's works will eventually be perceived by future scholars, as modern academic prejudices crumble under the relentless pressure of the semiotic future. But in the meantime, some formidable obstacles have to be overcome, and I see the work of this book as an early contribution to that task — Herculean, as it sometimes seems today — of clearing away an accumulation of historical stereotypes and prejudices of various kinds, including racial ones,¹² which stand in the way of a full and just assessment of the achievements of the Latin Age — especially in its final Hispanic phase — for what concerns early modern philosophy and postmodern prospects.

Given the synoptic achievement and historically privileged position of Poinsoot's work in time, providing, as Thomas A. Sebeok once remarked, the “missing link” between the ancients and the moderns in philosophy, why is he today a virtually unknown and thoroughly neglected figure in the history of philosophy, and in the history of early modern philosophy in particular? Because the Cartesian revolution took modernity down an entirely different path than Aristotelian or Thomistic had pursued, leaving the philosophical achievements of the Latins to be covered over again in the growth and underbrush of the passing modern centuries.

It is time to clear away that underbrush, and to restore to philosophy a picture of its historical development as whole, from its beginnings in ancient Greece to its highest achievements in Latin times, preparatory to the complementary establishment of science in the modern sense, which we are now in a position to see as an enterprise which completes and complements but by no means replaces the work of philosophy proper.

Mainstream modern philosophy developed, as Jacques Maritain remarked in his classic, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, “as though a philosophy of being could not also be a philosophy of mind”. Poinsoot's work shows the way beyond that prejudice, while at the same time presenting us with (to use again Maritain's words) “a philosophy that claims to face the universality of the extramental real without at the same stroke pretending to absorb all knowing into itself”. This reissue of Poinsoot's work encourages the hope “that we will see a new dawn break upon a new and glorious scientific era — putting an end to misunderstandings engendered in the realm of experimental research by the conflict between Aristotle and Descartes — in which the sciences of phenomena” — the *ideoscopic* sciences of modernity — “would finally achieve their normal organization”, yet established now alongside the *cenoscopic* science of philosophy. In such a manner “the divine good of intellectual unity, shattered for three centuries now, would thus be restored to the human soul.”

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spheres of religious belief and philosophical understanding, Aquinas was able to erect a framework for systematic thinking within which reason would keep its due, and hence within which intellectual dialogue would in principle be possible between faiths and across cultures. In time, the delicate plants of science, distinct from philosophy and theology alike, for the seeds of which Aquinas's main teacher Albert showed such keen sensitivity, would find room for their normal development within Aquinas's synthesis of philosophical doctrine and Christian religious dogma. That grace presupposes and perfects nature was Aquinas's motto across the boards, and nowhere more than in the affairs of the intellect.” See also *ibid.* pp. 304-305. And cf. Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge* (New York: Scribner's, 1959), *passim*.

¹² See Philip Wayne Powell, *Tree of Hate: propaganda and prejudices affecting United States relations with the Hispanic world* (New York: Basic Books, 1971; reprinted, with a new “Introduction” by the author, Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1985).