

**In the Twilight of Neothomism, a Call for a New
Beginning—A Return in Philosophy to the Idea of Progress
by Deepening Insight Rather than by Substitution:
A Review of *The Way toward Wisdom***

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Abstract. With a few exceptions, the relation of modern science to medieval natural philosophy is a question that has been largely shunned in the Neothomistic era, in favor of a preoccupation with establishing a “realist metaphysics” that has no need for science in the modern sense nor, for that matter, any need for natural philosophy either. Fr. Ashley’s work confronts this narrow preoccupation head-on, arguing that, in the view of St. Thomas himself, there can be no human wisdom which leaves aside scientific development. Ashley even goes so far as to point the way to the possible development of philosophy beyond the terms of the realist/idealist framework in which Neothomism had its say.

Fr. Ashley’s “Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Introduction to Metaphysics,” under the title *The Way toward Wisdom*,¹ takes its stand on a point that Thomas Aquinas could hardly have stated more prophetically or plainly, early in the text of his c. 1266 *Summa theologiae*, 1.84.8c, namely, the *continuity* which modern science maintains, but at a higher level of intellectual maturation, with the aims of the *philosophia naturalis* of Latin times. Yet this is a point concerning which, for the most part, proponents of Thomism in the late modern “Thomistic Revival” launched by Pope Leo XIII have preferred to bury their heads in the sand rather than to face, or even to admit, in their preoccupation to establish a notion of “metaphysics of *esse*” to be taken as the be-all and end-all of human wisdom, a “metaphysics” owing nothing to science as modernity has come to understand it, and entirely autonomous respecting that science (and pretty much anything else that modernity has to offer).

Nonetheless, the text from Aquinas in question tells us, to the contrary, that what was in gestation in the *philosophia naturalis* of the Latin Age to which

¹Benedict Ashley, *The Way toward Wisdom: An Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Introduction to Metaphysics* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

Thomas belonged exists now, as we cross the frontier between late modern thought and a postmodern era of intellectual culture, only at a much more advanced level. For:

The aim of natural science is that which appears primarily in sense perception . . . for the natural scientist does not seek to know the nature of a stone and of a horse except in order to know the reasons of those things which are perceived by sense. For it is clear that there cannot be a perfect judgment . . . of natural science concerning natural things if sensible things are ignored.²

If we compare this view of St. Thomas (which he no doubt shared with his teacher, Albertus Magnus) with the views developed in the greater part of the late modern Neothomistic development, we find a curious anomaly. Whereas St. Thomas saw the investigation *in detail* of the causes at work in the natural world to be the proper maturation of philosophy of nature, and that in turn to be the preamble *sine qua non* for metaphysics, the Neothomists spent most of their time trying to establish “Thomistic metaphysics” as a discipline owing nothing to the investigations of natural science (medieval or modern), an absolutely independent intellectual enterprise holding the key to wisdom.

Thus Leo Elders, in his review of the very book of Fr. Ashley here under review,³ raises the crucial question in his closing paragraph. “On points of detail,” he says, “has not the nature of modern physics changed to such a point that one can no longer pass from it to metascience?” That is to say, is it not our mission as Thomistic thinkers to put forward an *independent* understanding of metaphysics, which can be embraced and endorsed, in the end, even were there no such thing as modern science and, hence, justified in ignoring this science? The Neothomists of late modernity have characteristically proposed a metaphysics which purports to tell us the “truth about being” without any need to dirty our hands with experiment or experience beyond the judgment that *esse* implies the reality of God, with all that God’s reality implies for a correct understanding of creation in the order of reason as preamble to faith: that is what we need, something to enable us to brush aside scientific study as not really necessary to a *philosophy* of being. Among the late modern Thomists who have resisted the siren-call of a metaphysics proposed as autonomously superior to and indifferent

²Thomas Aquinas, c. 1266: *Summa theologiae* 1.84.8c: “ita naturalis scientiae finis est quod videtur principaliter secundum sensum . . . naturalis non quaerit cognoscere naturam lapidis et equi, nisi ut sciat rationes eorum quae videntur secundum sensum. manifestum est autem quod non posset esse perfectum iudicium . . . scientiae naturalis de rebus naturalibus, si sensibilia ignorentur.”

³Fr. Elders kindly provided me with the manuscript of his review before it was published in the *Review of Metaphysics* 61.2 (December 2007).

respecting the modern scientific developments, Fr. Benedict Ashley has been perhaps the single most audible voice on the North American scene.

We find Ashley’s answer to Elders’s question literally in the *opening paragraph* of *The Way toward Wisdom*:

At the beginning of this twenty-first century, the validity of the ancient and noble discipline traditionally called “metaphysics”, that claimed to be “First Philosophy”—that is, philosophy par excellence, or Human Wisdom—is generally questioned. Thus, academic “philosophy” takes on other, lesser, tasks. It seems presumptuous, therefore, to present an introduction to a subject whose very existence is in question. Yet that is what in this book I have rashly attempted. From Chapter V on, I find it useful to more or less drop the term “metaphysics” altogether, and replace it with what I will show is the more appropriate term, “metascience”, more appropriate because “physics” in Aristotle’s day, without envisioning thematically the difference between ideoscopic and cenoscopic knowledge,⁴ included virtually the whole of what since the 17th century has come to be called simply “science” in the modern sense. (Preface, p. xix.)

The terminological proposal in these opening lines is startling. In his subtitle, Ashley tells us that he is writing “An Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Introduction to *Metaphysics*.” Now, in the fifth sentence of the book’s opening paragraph, he tells us that “metaphysics” is a term we ought best to *replace* by the term “*metascience*,” that, indeed, “metaphysics” is an outmoded expression for what we now clearly see to be rather “metascience,” and we should adjust our vocabulary accordingly—at least to the extent we wish to consider ourselves to be faithful in this matter to the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas.

“Metascience” is a more appropriate term today than is the familiar traditional term “metaphysics,” Ashley proposes, for two reasons, both of which are crucial.

First, “physics” in the time of Aquinas, as earlier with Aristotle, “included virtually the whole of what since the seventeenth century has come to be called simply ‘science’ in the modern sense.” The truth of Ashley’s statement is well-evidenced

⁴Ashley’s footnote: “See below, Chapter III, Section D.1., pp. 85–86; and the extended discussion in John Deely’s *The Impact on Philosophy of Semiotics* (2003).” Further in his text (474, n49), Ashley explains that “this [cenoscopic/ideoscopic] distinction” is “between scientific knowledge founded on unaided sense observation and that founded on observation with artificial instruments and experiment,” a distinction drawn “in terms of ‘cenoscopic’ (from Greek for ‘directly viewed’) vs. ‘ideoscopic’ (from Greek for ‘specially viewed’) knowledge.” This is a terminology Peirce took from Jeremy Bentham, and which Ashley takes up in his book but following Deely’s proposal (see following note) for the changed spelling. A similar distinction is drawn by Robert Henle in *The American Thomistic Revival* (St. Louis, Mo.: Saint Louis University Press, 1999), chap. 3, “A Thomistic Explanation of the Relations between Science and Philosophy,” 33–45.

in the remark of St. Thomas cited above from 1.84.8c, where the detailed modern development of the sciences of nature is explicitly envisaged and stated to pertain to the mature state of the investigation of nature—its “final cause,” as it were.

Second, Ashley argues, “metascience” is more appropriate today than “metaphysics” because the “physics” of medieval and ancient times did not thematically envision the difference between ideoscopic and cenoscopic knowledge, the former of which requires experimentation and specialization while the latter does not. Thus, just as specialized scientific or ideoscopic knowledge presupposes the validity of cenoscopic knowledge based directly on critical conceptual analysis of what sensation reveals (according to St. Thomas) independently of conceptualization at the core of experience and as providing the material and partial measure of what concepts interpret *as* this or that, so too does whatever there is of continuity in philosophy from ancient times to the present depend upon the validity of cenoscopic analysis, as far as it goes. But in the investigation of nature, we have learned that cenoscopy is only a prelude to ideoscopy and subject to many corrections by that further development.

St. Thomas had already advised us plainly, in at least three critical junctures in his analysis of Aristotelian “first philosophy” (or “metaphysics”)—that is to say, in his *Commentary* on the work of Aristotle called *Metaphysics*, first at Book II, lectio 6, n. 398, again at Book VI, lectio 1, n. 1170, and yet a third time at Book XI, lectio 7, n. 2267—that until and unless we achieve some demonstrative knowledge of the fact that not all being is material, we have no basis for distinguishing between “metaphysics” and “physics”: “If the sensible and changeable substances of the physical environment are the first among beings, then natural science is first philosophy.” The reason is that, if all being is material, then *physics*—thematic and critical thought about the physical universe of nature—is “first philosophy,” that is to say, the science of being in just that sense that philosophers after Aristotle came to call “metaphysics.” This later appellation of “metaphysics,” coming centuries after Aristotle’s death and replacing Aristotle’s own appellation “first philosophy” (as Ashley now thinks “metascience” should replace “metaphysics”), was originally proposed on the grounds that it best named a science that considered the full scope of the problems of substance and causality that were uncovered and developed originally in physics. Once the investigations within physics had led to the discovery or realization that changeable being required for its possibility the postulation of an original being not subject to change from within as the actualization of potentialities brought about by interactions with other finite beings, then and only then are we warranted, in the original view of either Aristotle or Aquinas, to envisage another science of being that moves beyond physics. But without using the analyses of physics to provide an opening to such a “path beyond,” the claim to “rise above and beyond physics” is an empty claim, precisely a *flatus vocis*.

So Fr. Elders, in suggesting that “the ‘reality’ of atoms is so different that they can not be related directly to the realist physics of Aristotle,” is, perhaps unwittingly, hearkening back to the Enlightenment view that there is no continuity between experience as it gives rise to cenoscopic analyses and the knowledge that we acquire by ideoscopic means. That Enlightenment view, of course, implied the flat denial of any validity of cenoscopic knowledge in its own right, and was accompanied by the optimistic assumption that the complete replacement of “common sense” cenoscopic knowledge by ideoscopic developments was only a question of time—the view that was a staple of Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire. We may even go so far as to say that the Enlightenment is “over” only to the extent that thinkers have come to realize that ideoscopic knowledge could have no validity of its own unless the common starting point for *all* of human knowledge, the standpoint of cenoscopy, had a validity of *its* own. (Indeed, as I have argued at some length in my analysis in *Descartes & Poinsoot. The Crossroad of Signs and Ideas*,⁵ precisely this was the main background issue in the events shaping the break of modern philosophy with Latin scholasticism in the lifetime of Galileo, Descartes, and Poinsoot.)

Of course, Neothomists are not widely known for their sympathy with Enlightenment thought. But just as Enlightenment thinkers tended to see in the ideoscopy of modern science the sole extent of valid human knowledge, so at the other extreme the Neothomists themselves tended to see in “common sense” cenoscopy the possibility of a metaphysical standpoint absolutely independent of ideoscopic developments. Neothomists generally, as noted above,⁶ have argued for a “metaphysics of *esse*” which owes nothing to science and can be pursued in absolute independence of scientific developments. Thus Elders, in reviewing Ashley, cuts to the heart of the matter when he rightly says of Ashley’s work that “A dominant theme is that the study of physical nature shows

⁵John Deely, *Descartes & Poinsoot: The Crossroad of Signs and Ideas* (Scranton, Penn.: Scranton University Press, 2008), chaps. 1–4, pp. 3–28.

⁶The outstanding exception here is Jacques Maritain, who distinguished himself by insisting on the importance of modern science for understanding degrees of knowledge (*The Degrees of Knowledge* [Paris 1932; New York 1959]), and on the continued necessity for understanding and maintaining a philosophy of nature (*Philosophy of Nature* [Paris 1935; New York 1951]) irreducible to so-called “metaphysics.” Brooke Williams Smith, in her study *Jacques Maritain, Antimodern or Ultramodern?* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1976), notes that Maritain objected to the term “Neothomism” on the grounds that it suggests a “progress by substitution in which the Neo would devour the Thomism” (72; quoted from Maritain, *A Preface to Metaphysics*, 1939, 1958 Sheed and Ward reprint, 13). In the main body of proponents of the twentieth-century versions of a “metaphysics of *esse*,” as Ashley lays out their texts, exactly this is what actually happened, and the main point (the “overall thesis,” as we might say) of Ashley’s book is to restore to late modern Thomistic thought that “progress rather by deepening insight” which Maritain insisted upon as the only form of progress proper to cenoscopic knowledge in its contrast with ideoscopy.

the existence of a First Mover" itself Unmoved, i.e., a purely actual source of existence for the things that exist as mixtures of act and potency (which is to say, the whole of finite being, the whole of the physical universe as interacting subjects of existence):

[Ashley] is able to show that [metaphysics, or metascience, indifferently] presupposes the study of physical nature and the insight that not all things are material. This conclusion discards the approach to metaphysics of existential Thomists⁷ and John Wippel. We enter metaphysics having demonstrated the existence of immaterial reality.

Well, indeed, that view of Ashley is pretty much exactly what Aquinas held in insisting that if all being *were* material, physics would be first philosophy: there would be no room for a *metaphysics*, no room, in modern terms, for a "science beyond science," a *metascience*. Wippel and his philosophical kin may be right in their approach to "metaphysics." But if they are, then Aquinas, along with Ashley, missed the boat. To start to do, or claim to be doing, "metaphysics" without any showing on critical grounds that the material world does not comprise the whole of being, for Aquinas as for Ashley, is to beg the question.

After that first paragraph, opening Ashley's preface with the suggestion that the term "metaphysics" ought to be abandoned in favor of the term "metascience," we go a full sixty pages before our next encounter with the term "metascience" (although after chapter 5 the new term becomes the staple proposed in the preface), as follows (p. 60):

John Paul II⁸ deplores the "deep-seated distrust of reason which has surfaced in the most recent developments of much of philosophical research, to the point where there is talk of 'the end of metaphysics,'" and "philosophy is expected to rest content with more modest tasks such as the simple interpretation of facts, or an enquiry into restricted fields of human knowing or its structures." But he also calls for a new interpretation of the historical epochs or ages of philosophy as required for any deep understanding of how the term "postmodern" is finally best to be understood in philosophy,⁹ a principal theme of the semiotics movement. The time is ripe for a postmodern reconsideration of First Philosophy itself, now that the events of intellectual culture have brought us to the point where "metascience" can be seen to be the logically proper postmodern name for the recovery of this ancient enterprise in the spirit originally proper to it.

⁷I repeat again the exception that Maritain makes to Elders's claim.

⁸Ashley's note: "Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (1998), section 55."

⁹Ashley's note: "Ibid., section 91."

All of this passage is remarkable indeed, not least for its acknowledgment of the claim of semiotics to provide the positive essence or "sense" of the term "postmodern" in philosophy, if not intellectual culture generally. Semiotics is touched on in passing by Ashley at a number of places in this work,¹⁰ but his principal statement in the matter occurs in chapter 9:

[T]he notion of 'sign' has a transcendental character, since *everything* but the First Uncaused Cause is an effect, and every effect as such is a natural sign of its cause or causes, since from the existence of an effect we can know the existence of its cause, and from the essence of the effect we can know *something* of its cause, since whatever is in the effect must first be in its cause somehow. This transcendental, utterly inclusive sense of 'sign' requires that semiotics be considered primarily a task of Metascience, which is the only discipline that can deal with the whole range of Being as such. Even our knowledge of God as the Uncaused Cause is a knowledge through signs, since all of creation is a sign, though a very imperfect one. . . . (296–7)

This remark is reminiscent of Maritain's observation that the sign is a universal instrument in the human world, comparable to motion in the world of nature, since "Only in God does the life of the intellect make no use of signs."¹¹ In human animals, it was John Poinso, considered by Maritain to be his main teacher after Thomas Aquinas himself, who first pointed out that the action of signs as engendering awareness begins in sensation (*sentire*) as already a network of sign relations naturally determined (and hence prior to any "ontology/epistemology" distinction of modern thought);¹² and Maritain is in agreement with Ashley that the analysis of sensation in its difference from perception (*phantasiari*) and understanding is the key to understanding the "realism" of Thomas Aquinas.¹⁴

Nonetheless, Ashley's mention of semiotics is not for the purpose of directly exploring or evaluating its claim to require a standpoint that transcends the modern opposition between realism and idealism, but much rather to vindicate the claim of Aquinas that there cannot be an absolute independence of metaphysics respecting the scientific investigation of nature, along with the further point that

¹⁰E.g., see his diagram on p. 23 of a "Typology of Approaches to the Unification of Knowledge in the Western Tradition" and the nine lines of references in his index, p. 612.

¹¹Jacques Maritain, "Language and the Theory of Sign," in *Frontiers in Semiotics*, ed. Deely, Williams, and Kruse (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1986), 51–62 at 53.

¹²John Poinso, *Tractatus de Signis*, Book I, Question 6, "Whether the true rationale of sign is present in the behavior of brute animals and in the operation of the external senses," 204–15.

¹³See the "Diagram of the semiotic manifold" in Section 11.3 of *Augustine & Poinso: The Protosemiotic Development* (Scranton, Penn.: Scranton University Press, 2009), 123.

¹⁴See my analysis in *Intentionality and Semiotics: A Story of Mutual Fecundation* (Scranton, Penn.: University of Scranton Press, 2007).

modern science as ideoscopic is the natural maturation of ancient and medieval physics as cenoscopic. And even to this end it is remarkable that we find one of the principal figures of the twentieth-century development of Neothomism in the North American context adopting novel terminology—terminology that is not elsewhere encountered in the Neothomistic literature, to say the least—to express even his traditional views. For it remains that Ashley puts his adoption of novel terms wholly at the service of establishing the very opinions of St. Thomas that Neothomism generally specialized in dodging.

For long before the seventeenth-century beginnings of the development of science in the modern sense as knowledge primarily and thoroughly ideoscopic, Thomas Aquinas expressed and committed himself to a twofold view: on the one hand, that the study of nature finds its maturity only when it reaches to an understanding in detail of the causes of things as reality is manifested to external sense according to a constitution proper to things in themselves obtaining independently of human involvement; on the other hand, that we can move beyond natural knowledge of the physical surroundings only when and to the extent that we *probatively* discover the material world not to be the whole of being.

What are we to make of this situation? I suggest that, with the publication of this major book by Fr. Ashley, we need to recognize two irreducible meanings of the designation “Neothomism.”

First, there is the historical designation “Neothomism,” which simply circumscribes the first attempt at a thematic development of the thought of St. Thomas outside of the Latin language, the attempt mandated originally by the papal directive issued by Leo XIII in 1879 with the aim of restoring “realism” as against the “idealism” of post-Cartesian and Kantian thought which had reduced objectivity to a construction of the mind with mental representation in its very root.¹⁵

¹⁵Here permit me to recall what was said concerning this term in my *Four Ages of Understanding: The First Postmodern Survey of Philosophy from Ancient Times to the Turn of the 21st Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001) [hereafter *Four Ages of Understanding*], 342, n200: “I don’t know of a single important figure in the late modern Thomistic revival who accepted for himself the label ‘Neothomist’. Maritain and Gilson rejected it with particular vigor. But here it is not a question of how they thought of themselves, but of where they appear in history and how that place should be named. I doubt that Porphyry or Proclus thought of themselves as ‘Neoplatonists’, anymore than Gilson or Maritain thought of themselves as ‘Neothomists’. Still, the ‘Neoplatonists’ were the Platonists who belong to a definite historical epoch after Plato, with its distinctive preoccupations and problems. Just so, the ‘Neothomists’ were the Thomists of the revival of Thomism called into being by Pope Leo XIII’s 1879 encyclical, *Aeterni Patris*. This revival was distinctively concerned to vindicate, against the modern idealist doctrine that the mind knows only what the mind itself makes, the rights of the Thomistic doctrine that the mind is capable of a grasp of things as they exist in reality. This was the modern meaning of ‘realism’, as also of the post-Aquinian ‘scholastic realism’ that Peirce identified as belonging to the distinc-

Second, within this late modern historical development attempting to move Thomistic thought beyond the Latin tongue and into the arena of philosophy in the national languages where mainstream thought moved after the seventeenth century, there is the “Neo-Thomism” of that majority of “existential Thomists” who—contrary to Maritain, De Koninck, Ashley, and (prospectively, as we might put it) Thomas himself—consider the ideoscopy of modern science to be simply irrelevant, *multi passus extra viam*, when it comes to the raising and consideration of “metaphysical” questions. Where Thomism in the Latin Age was centered primarily in philosophy of nature rather than in metaphysics, and in “metaphysics” only as a subsidiary consideration, “Neothomism” in this second sense centered primarily in the attempt to elaborate a “metaphysics of *esse*” so defined and developed as to make philosophy of nature—let alone the development therefrom of sciences of nature in the modern sense—quite irrelevant and ignorable in principle: “a progress by substitution,” as we saw Maritain characterize it,¹⁶ in the course of which “the ‘Neo’ devours the ‘Thomism’.”

The *rejection* of “Neothomism” in this second sense, then (a rejection explicitly common to Ashley and to Maritain), is yet *compatible* with the label of “Neothomism” in the first sense. This first, properly historical designation of “Neothomism,” as a phenomenon of late modern philosophizing in the national languages, is an almost inevitable and inescapable designation¹⁷ for the whole lot of those late nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers who considered themselves “Thomists” in the sense of arguing for philosophical “realism” (the intrinsic knowability of *ens reale*, as we might put it, placed under erasure by modern “epistemology” with its designation of “things in themselves” as “unknowable”), and arguing also for the validity of a “metaphysical knowledge” which goes beyond, even with losing all connection with, the theoretical conjectures and even certainties of modern ideoscopic science.

Along with Ashley, Maritain is (to say the least) “one of the foremost of the Neothomists” in the irreducible first meaning identified in our text above. At the same time, neither of them is a “Neothomist” in the sense of that majority of “existential Thomists” who think that ideoscopic progress in the sciences is irrelevant to the question of whether “metaphysics” or “metascience” is the more appropriate term for the postmodern development of intellectual culture as in-

itive essence of pragmatism in its difference from pragmatism and modern philosophy generally (Peirce 1905: CP 5.423; discussed in Chapter 15 below, ‘Pragmatism is not Pragmatism,’ p. 616ff.). The Thomists who were preoccupied with the claims of modern idealism, and especially who championed realism against that idealism, are, as a historical group and intellectual movement of the 19th and 20th century, the ‘Neo-Thomists.’

¹⁶Maritain, *A Preface to Metaphysics*, 19, cited in note 6 above.

¹⁷Analogically comparable to the designation “Neoplatonism”: see my *Four Ages of Understanding*, 342, n200, cited in note 16 above.

cluding the prospective thought of Thomas Aquinas himself, dead—lo!—these seven-and-a-half centuries now. (Unless we recognize these two quite distinct senses of the term “Neothomism,” we will have considerable difficulty making sense of the fact, for example, that in that very book where we saw Maritain express his “dislike” for the term “Neo-thomism,”¹⁸ the book’s publisher says on the back jacket flap that Maritain’s “writing, teaching, and lecturing has led to his position as one of the foremost of the neo-Thomists.”)

But, along with De Koninck and Maritain in particular, Ashley—even more thoroughly—stands apart in his work among the Neothomists (as a sociological and historical reality of intellectual culture) by insisting that there is and can be no absolute divide separating cenoscopy from ideoscopy, not even in the development of “metaphysics” or (as he would prefer) “metascience.” Ashley gives the fullest argument of all that the knowledge of the reality of nature that goes beyond modern science—“metascience”—does so in just that way that Aristotle and Thomas in their development of “First Philosophy” went beyond the physics of their day to a knowledge of being in its full amplitude—“metaphysics.”

My own opinion is that today we stand in fact at a new frontier, called *faute de mieux* “postmodern.” Ashley’s work in this regard truly stands out as the highwater mark in the development of Neothomism. But, in my opinion, having reached that frontier, like Moses viewing the Promised Land, he himself does not quite manage to cross the frontier, to enter the “promised land.” In Neothomistic terms, I concur completely with the conclusion of C. S. Morrissey in his review of Fr. Ashley’s book, that “It is a benchmark achievement to which serious scholars in the future will be unable to avoid referring.”¹⁹

My only criticism of the book concerns the matter of the “postmodern frontier” which Fr. Ashley identifies but does not venture to cross. Besides restoring what seems to me the correct view of modern science as the ideoscopic maturation of the cenoscopic physics of the days of Aristotle and St. Thomas (the days “when the earth stood still, and there was nothing new in the heavens or under the sun save the comings and goings of individuals”), and besides showing that any science of “being as such” or *ens commune* depends upon a rational demonstration that material being is not the whole of being—beside all this, I say, Ashley’s book yet remains within the perspective of the philosophical sciences as divided between speculative knowledge of “the way things are” and practical knowledge of “things as subject to human control.”

¹⁸A dislike he expresses with full explicitness in *Pour la Justice, Articles et Discours (1940–1945)*: “I dislike the very name: neo-Thomism” (New York: Éditions de la Maison Française, 1945), 194–5.

¹⁹C. S. Morrissey, “The way toward wisdom is through metaphysics,” *The B. C. Catholic* 2 (October 2006): 8.

St. Thomas considered one of the distinguishing features of *sacra doctrina* to be that theology as based on the light of faith transcends the speculative/practical distinction. But today we find, based not on faith but on reason alone, that semiotics as the study of the action of signs (semiosis) *also* achieves just such a transcendence of the speculative/practical distinction, with its demonstration that the triadic relations which constitute signs in their proper being are at work from the first moments of sensation (as linking proper to common sensibles)²⁰ all the way to the farthest reaches of conceptual knowledge in speculations about God, angels, and everything in between. As the only *inherently* interdisciplinary perspective outside of theology as faith-dependent, semiotics provides the natural remedy to the increasing specialization that modern science demands, by showing that the whole of human experience and knowledge, ideoscopic and cenoscopic alike, is a web of sign-relations. This standpoint not only recovers “scholastic realism” looking back, but also, looking forward without the shackles of epistemological idealism,²¹ is able to take full account of the social construction of reality so well documented and studied in the modern social sciences.

Ashley’s book, unique in its full restoration of the Thomistic view that knowledge of nature finds its proper paths of maturation in the ideoscopic modern extensions of medieval cenoscopic natural philosophy, then, is timely and more than timely as the Neothomistic era of the debate against “idealism” enters its twilight, fading into that most recent past so familiar to all of us as “modern philosophy.” In also being the first major text of Thomism to make an explicit attempt to bring into the account the intellectual emergence and merits of semiotics as the study of sign-action, Ashley’s book, we may further say, points the way to the positive essence of a *postmodern* development of philosophy and intellectual culture, to a “new age” even for “Thomism.” Not since the work of John Poincaré, described by Maritain²² as “the latest and the most mature of the geniuses who explained St. Thomas” in the Latin line, has there been a work providing the kind of future indication that Ashley’s book provides. As Neothomism along with “modern philosophy” enters the twilight

²⁰See John Poincaré (“Joannes a sancto Thoma”), *Treatise on Signs*, Book I, Question 6; John Deely, *Augustine & Poincaré*, 67–176, esp. Section 12.11, pp. 161–3; and *Poincaré & Descartes*, esp. 53–62.

²¹As Peirce put it in his recovery of “scholastic realism,” Kant, in designating things-in-themselves as “unknowable,” had added to our experience of things a “meaningless surplussage” (c.1905: *Collected Papers* 5.525), earlier also described by Peirce (c.1885: 8.43) as “nonsense.”

²²*The Material Logic of John of St. Thomas*, trans. Yves R. Simon, John J. Glanville, and G. Donald Hollenhorst (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), vi. On this matter of Maritain’s opinion of Poincaré, see further *Reflections on America* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), 151–2; and *Le Paysan de la Garonne* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1966), English trans. Michael Cuddihy and Elizabeth Hughes, *The Peasant of the Garonne* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), 219.

presaging a postmodern dawn at the time of Ashley's writing, so in the early seventeenth century of Poinso't's time was the Latin Age fading into that then-most recent past so familiar to Galileo and Descartes as "scholasticism." Ashley's work is the first book of a major figure of modern Thomism, as Poinso't's was the last book of Latin Thomism, to point the way to the positive essence of a *postmodern* development of philosophy and intellectual culture, to a "new age" even for "Thomism."

We have in Ashley's book a work which summarizes the late modern development of Thomistic thought from 1879 to the present, but does so in the full realization that while *late modern* "Thomism" has had an important say on the contemporary scene, it is far from the last word in the discursive unfolding of philosophy itself. In summarizing and synthesizing the best of Neothomism and the range of developments of modern scientific and cultural studies, Ashley's work brings to a close the late modern involvement of Thomism as "Neothomism" by opening the way to a postmodern era for philosophy and intellectual culture as a whole, an era within which we may expect to see yet another epoch of Thomistic development, one transcending the opposition of "realism" to "idealism" in just the way that the action of signs transcends the division between mind-independent and mind-dependent being, *ens reale* and *ens rationis*.

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