BOOK REVIEW

On Saying and Showing McCabe's Aquinas: A Review on Herbert McCabe, On Aquinas, edited and introduced by Brian Davies OP, foreword by Anthony Kenny (London: Burns & Oates, 2008), 180pp.

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I.

In honor of the 700th anniversary of Thomas Aquinas' canonization, this paper revisits an important contemporary work on Thomas Aquinas that demonstrates a species of his philosophical genius. His work and legacy cannot be reduced to a singular monolithic interpretation. That is, the philosophical genius of his work lies precisely in its capacity to make sense of reality and the perennial questions of the human mind in different ways. One such way is that of Herbert McCabe. A way that by the end of this review should hope to show not only his critical originality but also makes us realize the seemingly inexhaustible wellspring of thought that marks the genius of the Angelic Doctor.

The preliminary inquiry that guides a review of any textual work is the question of what it is about. To this concern, a general response can be given: this work of 180 pages long and published in 2008 deals with some aspects of Thomas Aquinas' philosophy. This leads, logically, to two clarifications. What are these aspects? And in what way does it deal with them? A provisional answer to the first question is that the book is divided into fifteen

chapters beginning with a contextualization of both Aquinas and the milieu of his time, thirteenth-century Italy, stretching until his death which saw him, and his work exaggeratingly valorized in some instances such as, purportedly, during the Council of Trent (McCabe, 2008). After the first chapter, the next fourteen chapters deal with rational psychology—referring to the concept of life and at the same time the intellectual operations of the rational soul —,general metaphysics—referring to things and the world—, and ethics—with a particular focus on the different virtues and their roles in the operations that lead to decision and action. This is a provisional account of the first clarification since its fuller picture is interminably entangled with the second question. The elucidation of the second clarification is the cipher that unlocks the peculiar sense of the different aspects of Thomas Aquinas' philosophy in the lectures of McCabe that forms chapter two to fifteen in his book. Thus, in answering the second question the answer to the first question congeals to form a sensible whole. The guiding principle to which this second question takes is to pay attention to what is shown in what is said, a strategy that takes inspiration from McCabe's inspiration, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who articulates the pivotal relation between saying and showing beginning with the fourth proposition of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (TLP) (Wittgenstein, 2001). This strategy entails two levels of approach. The first level deals with the philological facts which are used to infer insights that can inform an answer to the second question. The second level focuses on the logical structure, akin to but not like the logical form in Wittgenstein's TLP, that permeates the entire work. The logical structure is revealed in following the strategy of primarily attending to what is shown. From these clarifications, implications can be drawn to complete a review of McCabe's book, *On Aquinas.*

II.

The book, On Aquinas, is based on lectures that Herbert McCabe gave in Blackfriars, Oxford a few years before his death (McCabe, 2008, p. xi). Compiled and edited by Brian Davies, a brethren of fifteen years younger in the same Order of Preachers and himself an established scholar on the philosophy of religion, the book is published in 2008 under the imprint of Continuum Press. Since the book has been compiled, edited, and published posthumously, McCabe did not have control over the original lectures' arrangement, referencing, and copy-editing changes. However, Davies writes that the lectures were written by McCabe because "McCabe never spoke publicly without a written text" (McCabe, 2008, p. xi). This is an important

fact because a detail like this reflects the quality of accuracy between the original lectures and the posthumous work, which is a common issue in philology. For instance, in determining the accuracy of mediaeval texts, the inquirer must take into consideration that not all copies of the same texts are the same and that variations are inherently part of the scribal and manuscript culture of the time. Copyists may exclude and include some other details based on, among others, carelessness, and caprice. A modern example of this is the decisive work of the Swiss Linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure. His "Course on General Linguistics" was precisely a course given around the later part of the first decade of the 20th century. It became a book that arguably modernized linguistics from its past regional forms because his students, Charles Bally, and Albert Sechehaye, compiled their notes in those lectures and published them (de Saussure, 2013). Whether or not Saussure has said more or less than what he gave in those lectures that are reflected in the published book can only be taken in speculation and faith. In the case of this work, the additions made were only references, the title, and the chapter titles, copy edits, and some translations. Davis notes, "Except when otherwise indicated, quotations from Aquinas are translated by McCabe" (McCabe, 2008, p. xii).

The editorial work on giving the title and the chapter titles has an effect on determining the narrative identity of this bundle of unpublished lectures. Thus, the editorial work is included in this scrutiny. The justification for the "simple title" that Davies gave to the work which, according to him, "is accurate without promising more than is delivered" (McCabe, 2008, p. xii) is correct. What Davies does not further explain however is that the accuracy of its title refers to its ambivalence. That is, the work is indeed on Aquinas, but not everything about Aquinas nor does it specify what aspects of Aquinas —not to mention whether what is referred to is his life, his thoughts, his philosophy, or his works—is encompassed; thus, neither referring to the general nor the particular the title places the work in the limbo of ambivalence. The ambivalence of the title imbues a demeanor that lends to its reception as a general introduction to Aquinas. Davies even began with this thinking that the work is an introduction owing to the reason that the first chapter introduces, albeit in a remarkably brief way, the life of Thomas Aquinas and the historico-cultural context of this time. That the original lectures at Blackfriars were advertised as "An introduction to Aquinas" (McCabe, 2008, p. xii), also lends to this initial consideration of the lecture to be indeed an introduction. And yet, Davies holding onto that ambivalence does not commit to the categorization of the work as an introduction, which unlike McCabe's essay "A Very Short Introduction to Aquinas" (McCabe,

2016) quite obviously announces itself. The Foreword written by Anthony Kenny breaks this ambivalence by categorizing the work as a good "introduction to the philosophy of human nature" but with the qualification that, it is for "those who are already aware of the abiding value of Aquinas 'insight" (McCabe, 2008, p. ix).

Despite the analytic persuasions of Kenny and Davies, an orientation that values precision and clarity in language, both have to circuitously imply what this review takes the cudgels of explicating: Herbert McCabe's *On Aquinas* is not, as ordinarily understood, an introductory work to Aquinas. That is, it is not in the same way as Fergus Kerr's (2009) *A Very Short Introduction to Aquinas* and Ralph McInerny's (1990) *A First Glance At Thomas Aquinas* are introductions.

To put this further in context, the work can be compared to other works with the claim of being introductions. One is written originally in French, while the other is in German. Vincent Descombes' *Modern French Philosophy* describes itself as "intended to be *an introduction to French Contemporary Philosophy*" for those who are "as exterior as possible to French Philosophical Tradition and modes, with the languages and issues of what is known as philosophical debate in France today (Descombes, 1998, p.1). Explicitly beginning this way, its treachery unfolds more concretely in the flipping progression of the pages. It can be noticed that indeed it is an introduction for those who are not familiar with modern French philosophy, but it does not at all forewarn the reader that this introduction requires a heavy background in continental philosophy. It is unapologetic in its beginning discussions on Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger as the fundamental grounds for the proper introduction to modern French philosophy. Thus, someone who does not come from the continental tradition, but wants to be introduced to modern French philosophy can take up Descombes' book and may end up more confused. The other work is Martin Heidegger's *Introduction to Metaphysics* (Heidegger, 2000) which does not need any introduction on why despite the term "introduction" in its title is not at all an introduction that is expected for the uninitiated to the history of philosophy. McCabe's harmlessly sounding *On Aquinas* has this family resemblance of what is taken to be an "introduction" to that of Descombes' and Heidegger's works. The difference between McCabe's work from both can be loosely compared in terms of quantity and quality. It is different in terms of quantity along the lines of the degree of complexity in readability and comprehension. McCabe's *On Aquinas* despite its colloquial style can be difficult for those who are not well-attuned to the general style of analytic philosophy. It also

assumes but does not demand some background of the tradition, particularly on Wittgenstein, since the legerdemain of insights—which will be further explored later—that arise from the paradoxically informal language relies on some familiarity with the linguistic philosophies that define the philosophy departments of Cambridge and Oxford during the time of the original lectures. Thus, in terms of the complexity of its readability, McCabe's is lesser in extent than Descombes' but without doubt farther in reach than the complexity of Heidegger's *Introduction*. In terms, however, of the quality of complexity in originality, McCabe's seems, to this reviewer, more complex than that of Descombes', and again Heidegger's *Introduction* stands far more complex as *Darstellung* is to the *Geist* in the philosophies of German Idealism. Descombes' work explicates the philosophers and philosophies in the context of the French philosophical tradition and adds his critique and assessment as he goes along. Thus, Descombes' work is not merely a textbook introduction since his assessments form the basis for the work's novelty while maintaining to be an introduction to modern French philosophy. McCabe's *On Aquinas* is, for this review, far more original despite the seemingly informal and colloquial approach employed in the discussion and the ambivalence of the title—the latter is, of course, no fault of McCabe. Kenny's ending in the Foreword not only justifies this review's position because, according to him, "the book is not a treatise about Aquinas" (McCabe, 2008, p. ix); thus, it is not an introduction to Aquinas since it is not a work about Aquinas. But because Kenny continues, "it is an exercise in philosophy with Aquinas" (McCabe, 2008, p. ix) that it is a work that is developing its philosophical position, which owing to the author's affinity with Aquinas makes the work still within the orbit of influence of the thought of Thomas Aquinas and yet, as punctuated in the means of explaining Thomas' thought, quite original.

III.

Kenny's last statement in the Foreword that McCabe's is not about Aquinas but a "philosophy with Aquinas" becomes clearer as one progresses in the reading of the work. However, Kenny's last statement already hints at the pivotal element in McCabe's *On Aquinas*, which is the preposition "with."

The "with" in Kenny's "philosophy with Aquinas" may have been intended to simply refer to reading McCabe's work as a journey in understanding philosophy with Aquinas as a companion. This review thinks that there is something more to this. As a journey in philosophical

understanding, with Aquinas as the guide, McCabe reiterates the same paradigm of *philosophia* as the love of wisdom since its ancient beginnings. It is the paradigm at the heart of Socrates' dialogues, Plato's dialectics, and Aristotle's Peripatetics. It is a walk with friends, *philia*, in pursuit of wisdom, *Sophia*, through the experiences shared in language. This seems to fit Kenny's description of "philosophy with Aquinas." This gesture coincides with the structure of McCabe's work. To preempt the discussion, McCabe devotes a lecture on friendship, which Davies entitled "Chapter 6: Narratives and Living Together." McCabe's statement captures this review's reading of Kenny's last statement in the Foreword. According to McCabe, "We have, then, a special name for humans living with each other: we call it friendship. Friendship is more than love. Friendship is more than people wishing well for other people. It involves what Aquinas calls *communicatio*, sharing, and the New Testament calls *koinonia*, sharing a common life. Friendship is a matter of being with others" (McCabe, 2008, p. 54). This should give us a glimpse of the structure of McCabe's work. This should illumine what these aspects in McCabe's book are and at the same time show their relation to each other. McCabe's work mirrors not Thomas Aquinas' approach and style, but Ludwig Wittgenstein.

IV.

Following the remarks of the previous chapter emphasizing the preposition "with" in the syntagma "philosophy with Aquinas" as Kenny describes McCabe's work, a *methodos* in the double sense of the word surfaces. *Methodos* as, first, a way of approach and, second, a path of development. The first sense is synchronic; the second sense is diachronic.

As a way of approach to the themes in the book, McCabe employs an analysis of the nature and function of language to illuminate aspects in Aquinas' thought that are discussed in the book. Language is the crucial pivot that is key in making sense of the chapters of the work. To show this, this review provides summaries of each chapter.

In "Chapter Two: Living Things," McCabe circuitously attempts to define life, which after admitting some exceptions particularly in his discussion on *auto-mobiles* as self-movement, has to resort to the linguistic strategy of Thomas to circumscribe something while admitting exceptions. McCabe employs analogy. At the heart of this chapter, however, is the distinction he makes within the conception of life that is capable of self-

movement. This distinction arises from the use of language in turning an event that is experienced by a living being into a meaningful event (McCabe, 2008, p. 14).

"Chapter Three : Things and Facts" deals with metaphysics in the sense of things in the world. He begins by again employing the nature of language to make a distinction between definitions and descriptions (McCabe, 2008, p. 17). The point here is that the identity of a thing is expressed as a definition, which is determined by its essence. A fact, on the other hand, is not strictly a thing but an event in the world. It does not have an essence as opposed to a thing, and therefore can only be described. A definition is a necessary element of what makes a thing what it is, while a description is a contingent element that tries to capture the accidents of an event in the world. What McCabe does in this chapter is to suture the necessary with the contingent, the thing with the fact, the definition with the description—noticeable is the preposition that was emphasized earlier, "with." This is purchased through language.

"Chapter Four: Sensation, Language, and Individuals" discusses the relation between sensation, a property of living beings which he discussed in chapter two; and individuals, the premise of which has been established in chapter three in his discussion of a thing. The relation between these two is brought together by language. Language bridges sensation and individuals in such a way that what is experienced as sensation can only be brought to the mind as an individual through the linguistic capacity to produce symbols and statements. That is, sensation is the access point. Language is what bridges matter and form. An individual is the comprehension of this or that, say, a cat which in the end is expressed through language. It is interesting to note that McCabe is against the idea of abstractionism, which is common among readers and scholars of Aristotle and Aquinas. He does not discuss his rejection of abstractionism until the chapter on the interior senses (McCabe, 2008, p. 134).

The relation articulated here is important since it produces a distinction between animals and human beings. McCabe writes that the distinction lies in language because of it "we are alive in a different way from other animals and it is because of language that we are self-transcendent in a different way from other animals" (McCabe, 2008, p. 34). This self-transcendent property in language is decisive because it is what hands human beings' history and traditions, which are more than just a product of the evolutionary process (McCabe, 2008, p. 34). It is in this chapter that McCabe,

in a certain way, begins to conflate language with rationality. He writes, "So to have a linguistic (or what Aquinas calls a rational) life is to be more animate, more alive, more of an animal, than brute beasts" (McCabe, 2008, p. 31).

"Chapter Five: Change, Language, Reasons, and Action" continues the advances made in the previous chapters, particularly, on rationality and language, and sensations. In this chapter, McCabe discusses the self-transcendent effects of language. Most crucial is that language affords the human being to go beyond the particular ways that structure his world, unlike animals which must rely on these structures for their existence. Although not mentioned by McCabe, what is being referred to here can be explained following the concept introduced by the pioneer of zoosemiotics, Jakob von Uexkuell. This is his concept of the *Umwelt*, the structure or the world for an animal that encompasses its meaning patterns (von Uexkuell, 1992). For animals, such as von Uexkuell's example, the tick, a dog's legs are both home and lunch. This is the ticks' *umwelt*. Human beings, on the other hand, can comprehend their world and restructure and reconfigure the ways of seeing and talking about it because of language. Precisely because of this, the chapter initially opens with thinking of action. That if human beings, unlike animals, can restructure the world by seeing and talking about the world, through language, then the human being is able to act or react in this or that way according to his comprehension of the world.

In Chapter Six, McCabe already hinted that a property of language is that it cannot be private. He shares the same position with a reading of Wittgenstein (2009) that rejects the private language argument. The discussion on the public nature of language is explicated only in Chapter Seven. However, this is important to mention because the logical consequence of the public nature of language is the community. It should not be surprising to see that there is an etymological connection between communication and community. The etymon for both is the common which in ancient Greek is *koine*. Expounding on this connection that has been mentioned earlier, language as communication results in social life. Since language is not private, then it can only be shared. This sharing forms the community. McCabe's reading of Aquinas is reminiscent of Aristotle's Book VIII to IX of the *Nichomachean Ethics*. This bolsters the earlier reference in relation to Kenny's description, "philosophy with Aquinas." Language brings human beings to live together (1170b10-20), that is, to form friendships and communities. Animals only survive together, but do not, in this sense, live together. This idea is connected to the previous chapter in a way that animals,

in not possessing language, are unable to reconfigure the meaning patterns of their world. The insights in Chapter Four—that with language the human being creates history and tradition—are reinforced in this chapter because this history and tradition are constituted in the stories human beings tell each other. Thus, this sixth chapter is aptly titled by Davies as "Narratives and Living Together."

"Chapter Seven: Meanings, Understanding and Making Decision" picks up from the end of the fifth chapter but begins interestingly with a discussion on virtue as a kind of disposition. Language's pivotal role is here again demonstrated as the bridge that informs the operational relation between meaning and understanding in the world. That is, to understand something entails that it is meaningful; something is meaningful because it is understood. Language is the bridge between the two. The result of this relation between meaning and understanding made possible through language, is the need to act. For animals, which are unable to restructure their world, the action that comes from the meaning in their world is almost always automatic, or to be more precise, involuntary. This is not the case with human beings. The linguistic capacity allows human beings to decide how to proceed in this or that situation. The connection to the beginning discussion on virtue is that the decisions made by the human being, informed by the relation between meaning and understanding, slowly form one's *habitus* or disposition. The constant following of the right disposition, which is made possible by meaning and understanding, is what founds the life of virtue. In this way, the animal is not able to live a life of virtue because it does not possess language. McCabe states, "It is, as I have said, our linguistic capacity to understand things and situations under an indefinite number of descriptions that in St Thomas's view is the root of human freedom, the root of our capacity to make actions really our own, flowing from our own decision, and also of course the root of our capacity to deceive ourselves and behave irrationally, and badly" (McCabe, 2008, p. 67).

There is hardly a discussion on language in "Chapter Eight: Emotions and Inclinations", a distinguishing mark it shares with the first chapter. In this chapter, McCabe discusses the role of emotions, what in Aquinas is called the "passions of the souls," to the good and, therefore, the virtuous life which was opened in the last chapter. Perhaps owing to the nature of emotions as a non-rational event, the chapter remains silent on language. Emotion seems to be an experience that can only be talked about in language but does not pass through the process of language, and yet McCabe also suggests that emotions are important in the virtuous life, but that it must be guided by virtue

(McCabe 2008, p. 78). This chapter also marks the diminution of the explicit role of language as a pivotal mechanism that McCabe uses in approaching Aquinas. Although it will be mentioned again in the next chapter, it will become more and more buried beneath the practical applications of the human being. In the later part of the review, in the discussion on the second sense of *methodos*, the review will show why this is decisive.

The three chapters constituting "Chapter Nine: Action, Deliberation, and Decision"; "Chapter Ten: Deliberative Action"; and "Chapter Eleven: Prudentia" deal with human action. McCabe sketches the mechanism of the practical operations in Aquinas that produces a human, therefore, voluntary action. Unlike the other chapters, these three chapters no longer discuss the pivotal role of language as much as the earlier chapters have. There is however an exception in Chapter Nine in which McCabe tries to connect these three chapters devoted to the complexity of human action back to its intellectual moorings. This link, again putting to fore the function of language, is Aquinas' notion of *intentio*. This discussion of intentionality is the synthetic result between the earlier articulations of the mental processes behind making sense of things and connecting it to practical reasoning. McCabe writes, "Aiming at the end is what Aquinas calls *intentio* and this is being attracted by some good presented to us by our understanding. It is an actualization of our capacity to be attracted that is aroused by our linguistic interpretation of the world 'taking it up into the structure of language'" (McCabe 2008, p. 80). *Intentio* connects language with understanding, interpretation, deliberation, decision, and its fruition to the action. Within this enumerated process between the intellectual and practical reasonings is the virtue of prudence or prudential which McCabe discusses in the eleventh chapter.

Chapters Twelve and Thirteen are devoted to the discussion of the interior senses, viz., common sense, aestimative sense, imagination, and sense-memory. The interior senses still, as the name implies, belong to the sense and not the rational faculty. And yet, an understanding of the operations of the interior senses is crucial in connecting the material world to the intellectual. Constituting the most technical parts of the book with its details of how experience is processed even before its intellectualization, these two chapters recapitulate the importance of language in the entire process of sense-experience to comprehension. He writes, "The advantage of starting from the language end is that it is not a theory that I use words to communicate. It is an observable fact. Nor is it a theory that the value of words in communication is established by convention and not a physical

property of the words. Words are just more obvious and available than things that go on under my skull" (McCabe, 2008, 134). Also, at the center of these discussions, McCabe focused on a reading of Aquinas' *Imaginatio* and distinguished it with the understanding. The former is a process that belongs to animal cognition; the latter, on the other hand, belongs to rational cognition.

The last two chapters of the book, "Moral Virtues", are apt as concluding chapters because they complete the discussion of human actions that originate from the rational and linguistic capacity to make sense and understand things. These involve an explication of both the intellectual processes and the operations of the interior sense to the movement of practical reasoning, which, in turn, involves the mechanism of deliberation, decision-making, and the role of virtue, such as prudence, in the entire process. This chapter closes with its discussion and elaboration of the different moral virtues. These are achieved as a disposition only through the repetition of the entire processes mentioned, but only if the repetition aims the good. Also, the achievement of the virtuous disposition is possible not only in the world *simpliciter*, but also in human society. If the aim for all these is the good life, that is, living together with other human beings, and living a passionate and virtuous life, then this can only be secured when society exercises justice.

V.

Language plays a pivotal function in McCabe's *On Aquinas*. Beginning with remarks on the first sense of *methodos*, McCabe's principle in reading Aquinas is that language is an explication of thought such that without language there can be no access to thought. The implication of this is that there can be no way to determine the operations of the intellect—and even its existence—without language. He demonstrates this orientation throughout the work, but this is most pronounced in the first half—except for the first chapter—of the book. In "Chapter Four: Sensation, Language and Individuals," McCabe makes the claim the rational animal that defines the human being is also at the same time a linguistic animal. To be a rational being entails being linguistic. McCabe writes, "So to have a linguistic (or what Aquinas calls a rational) life is to be more animate, more alive, more of an animal, than brute beasts" (McCabe, 2008, p. 31).

It is tempting to think that since McCabe's work is originally constituted as a series of lectures that it must have no logical structure.

However, the discussion of McCabe's way of approaching Aquinas, through the employment of language as the pivotal mechanism that synchronically connects the different aspects in the book, shows its structure by not saying it.

A question can be raised however in relation to this showing of the structure. If language is the pivotal element that connects the different chapters together, why is it that some chapters do not employ language in their discussions, or if they do only minimally? It can be noticed that the diminution of the role of language in the books tapers as it reaches its end. There are discussions on language in chapters twelve and thirteen, but they serve only to recapitulate their function that was already discussed in the earlier chapters. In comparison to the first half of the book, again except for the first chapter, and the second half of the book, it can be noticed that the discussion on language is more pronounced in the former than the latter. The synchronic view—that first sense of *methodos* as a way of approach that was articulated in the early part of this review—is unable to provide a perspective. This is where the diachronic view comes into place, the second sense of *methodos* as the path of development.

Beginning from chapter two to the last chapter, the movement of the book builds the conception of reason as language, beginning with the conception of life and its distinction between the life that possesses the capacity of language and the other which do not. The *Bildung* of language through the book is also in the process of trying to understand itself in its own articulation as it traverses from the aspects of life to things, to identity and change, to sensation, to the public and social life. This is the first half of the book: language, which is at the same time rationality, articulates itself and its function. In the second half, however, the role of language begins to taper down. This division can be taken to be the development from being intellectual to being practical. What this may mean is that language is most explicit in talking, so to speak, when it tries to understand and comprehend things, in this case, itself. Language begins to be quiet when it starts to deal with action because in the end, despite action being informed by thought and language, to do something ultimately means not to say it, but to show it. Thus, the concluding chapters could not be more apt; it concerns moral virtues, which require action, and thus are better shown than said. It is in this sense that McCabe explicates Aquinas and privileges the role of language in the interpretation; but also, in a deeper sense, he gestures that language must be silent so that good works can be done and shown. The beatific vision in Thomas Aquinas is after all the mute experience of a showing that which no words can ultimately capture. To conclude, the review sees McCabe's work

not in the usual sense of an introduction. McCabe takes Wittgenstein as an inspiration in the privileged accorded to language; this is demonstrated throughout the work. But McCabe's ontological commitments are closer to Aquinas' own than that of the non-committal Wittgenstein. His privileging of language but remaining committed to reality, in the scholastic sense, places him in a strange place between nominalism and realism. This nameless strange place, which McCabe labors to articulate and ultimately show, can only be original.

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