

How to Think the Otherness of Medieval Thought? On Decortian Hermeneutics¹

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*“One should acquire some wisdom when communicating with others.”
Thomas of Aquinas²*

*“If we cut ourselves off from experience and signs,
we will be unable to see the presence of God.”
Jean Vanier³*

1. Introduction

The core message of this paper concerns methodology. Nevertheless, instead of going into minute and boring details of interpretative methods, it is rather aimed at a *change of perspective* in its readers. An entire honorable philosophical tradition represented by many great names, such as Heraclitus, Socrates, Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Pierre Hadot holds that in order to become a philosopher one should *undergo a radical change of perspective*. Yet, just as in the religious life of a monk, no singular occurrence of personal *conversion* or *μετανοια* is sufficient, rather one has to grow into a *sustained effort* of changing one’s mind and habit through a lifetime, I contend that in the very same way a philosophical *μετανοια* can and should become habitual.⁴

A tanulmány megjelent: *Sapientiana* 8 (2015/2) 40–60.

¹ Herewith I should like to express my heartfelt gratitude to those people who made possible that I could present several versions of this paper on different occasions during the last academic year: to Max Latona and Joshua Tepley, at Saint Anselm College, in Manchester, New Hampshire; to Mark Webb, Anna Christina Soy Ribeiro and Jonathan Dorsey at The College of Arts and Sciences of Texas Technical University, Lubbock, Texas and finally to Marcello López Cambronero and my friend Mátyás Szalay at the Academia Internacional de Filosofía Instituto de Filosofía Edith Stein, in Granada, Spain. This paper heavily relies on the thought of the late Flemish scholar, Jos Decorte (1954–2001) whom I was privileged to have as my first Doktorvater at the Institute of Philosophy at the Catholic University in Leuven, Belgium. Both Decorte’s person and his thought have been a great source of inspiration for my own work, which the present paper summarizes and further develops. (Cf. GERGELY TIBOR BAKOS: *On Faith, Rationality and the Other in the Late Middle-Ages, A Study of Nicholas of Cusa’s Manuductive Approach to Islam*, Wipf and Stock, Eugen, 2011.) My gratitude naturally extends to Jos Decorte as well.

² “Debet homo acquirere sapientiam cum aliis communicando,” in his Sermon *Puer Jesus proficiebat* as quoted by HELMUT HOPING: *Weisheit als Wissen des Ursprungs. Philosophie und Theologie in der “Summa contra gentiles” des Thomas von Aquin*, Herder, Freiburg in Breisgau, 1997, p. 1.

³ JEAN VANIER: *Signs. Seven Words of Hope*, Paulist Press, New York / Mahwah NJ, 2013, p. 45.

⁴ The adjective *philosophical* delineates this kind of conversion from religious ones. A proper discussion of the relationship between philosophical and religious conversion would need another study.

The content of this conversion or change of perspective is related to a certain way or habit of looking at things, especially to our looking at philosophical knowledge. Turning around our perspective means here a refocusing our attention to the *practical dimension* of knowledge – or to employ a term borrowed from Michael Polanyi and Gilbert Ryle on the *knowing how*.⁵

To approach this search for a change of perspective can be expressed in the language of postmodernity as well: in this paper my interest in the first place concerns as to how we can approach the Otherness of medieval philosophical texts – or any Other for that matter. My general – admittedly not very original – hermeneutical position is that while the appearance of the Other, the yet not understood, the strange one prompts our rationality to produce different ways to deal with this Other, the exact responses are determined by the types of rationality involved. It seems to me that for thinking the Other a very special kind of rationality is required. I argue that a rationality that is able to think *difference* or *transcendence* is far from being the exclusive possession of post-modern philosophies. Based on an *existential hermeneutics* coming from the late Jos Decorte, I think that in this respect we can still learn from the medievals.⁶

The term “*manuductive*” captures well in many respects my concerns, therefore highlighting its meaning helps me clarify at the outset a basic point about medieval knowledge. The neologism *manuductive* has been consciously crafted in order to express what can be described as *the practical, practice-bound or formal dimension* of Nicholas of Cusa’s thought.⁷ In this connection I understand *formal* referring to the dimension of *knowing-how*. *Practice-bound* refers to Wittgenstein’s understanding of knowledge in need of a certain practice as its background, while the term *practical* has a broader scope than our practical rationality: its meaning lies much closer to the *Aristotelian* understanding of *practical knowledge* as *aiming at a certain human conduct*.⁸

“*Manuductive*” comes from Latin “*manuductio*”, i.e. ‘(a) leading by the hand’. In basic agreement with many Cusanus researchers one can safely say that Nicholas’s use of knowledge is truly medieval in that respect, for him, knowledge should lead humans towards God.⁹ In other words, knowledge has an *anagogic* function and its movement expresses an intellectual habit typically medieval. As Cusanus would have it knowledge is a sort of *manuductio*. With Decorte I maintain that

⁵ For *knowing what* and *knowing how* cf. MICHAEL POLANYI: *The Tacit Dimension*, Doubleday, New York, 1967, and GILBERT RYLE: *The Concept of Mind*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1970.

⁶ See especially JOS DECORTE: *Eine kurze Geschichte der mittelalterlichen Philosophie*, Ferdinand Schöningh, Paderborn, 2006; ID.: *Geschichte und Eschatologie. Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das mittelalterliche Leben*, in: Jan Aertsen and Martin Pickavé (ed.): *Ende und Vollendung: Eschatologische Perspektiven im Mittelalter*, de Gruyter, Berlin, 2002, pp. 150–161, and ID.: *Sapientia: Between Superbia and Vanitas*, in: Stephen F. Brown (ed.): *Meeting of the Minds. The Relations between Mediaeval and Classical Modern European Philosophy*, Brepols, Turnhout, 1998, pp. 477–506.

⁷ See GERGELY TIBOR BAKOS: *On Faith, Rationality*, op. cit.

⁸ Cf. *Metaphysics* 1025b25: “*all science (dianoia) is either practical, poetical or theoretical*”. For Aristotle ethics and politics were both practical sciences their aim being a special conduct (respectively of the individual and of the society). What in our everyday language is called practical knowledge, he would call poetical, i.e. technical for us.

⁹ For an exploration of this theme in relation to Nicholas’s *De Concordantia Catholica* see TIBOR BAKOS: *Recovering Nicholas’s Early Ontology: A reading of the ‘De concordantia catholica’*, in: Jean-Michel Counet and Stéphane Mercier (eds.): *Nicolas de Cues: les méthodes d’une pensée*, l’Institut d’Études Médiévales, Louvain-la-Neuve, 2005, pp. 155–173.

“A guidance [i.e. “*manuductio*”], as Nicholas explains it in the *De Docta Ignorantia* and also in the prologue to the *De Visione Dei*, always leads the believer from the sensible to the intelligible, and from the intelligible to the unfathomable mystery of the Godhead. Such a *manuductio* is always intended as a guidance [the same term] into *mystical theology*, that is to say into a vision of the Divine – to the extent that this is possible in this life (*visio Dei*).”¹⁰

2. Thinking Medieval Thought

In what follows, the Decortian hermeneutical approach will be outlined in some details and set in relation to more traditional approaches towards medieval thought, namely the Neo-Scholastic, the analytic, and the more historically minded ones. It should be especially emphasized that I consider my approach only as a corrective to these aforementioned ones. My aim is thus not at all to discredit anything of value in them, but instead to learn from each and to go deeper. The following discussion contains my methodological considerations and is concerned with medieval thinking and philosophy in general. It forms, as it were, the preconditions for a *philosophical conversion*.

2.1. On the Neo-Scholastic or Neo-Thomistic Approach

“*Scholasticism*” usually refers to theology and philosophy as it was taught at the medieval schools and universities of Europe. Over against the advance of modern science and the criticism coming from modern philosophy this kind of intellectual culture has pretty much survived up to quite recently still shaping Catholic universities and seminaries. When in the year 1879 pope Leo XIII published his encyclical “*Aeterni Patris*,” explicitly dedicated to “*the restoration of Christian philosophy*”, the pope especially – albeit not exclusively – recommended Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) as the champion of philosophy in its true sense.¹¹ This recommendation was to be understood as a reaction against modern thought since Descartes. The response to the encyclical from the Catholic world was both global and sustained. Journals, learned societies, new curricula came into being. Moreover, the emerging intellectual movement did not confine itself to seminaries and pontifical academies, but had its lasting effect on Catholic colleges and universities as well.

Neo-Scholasticism refers to this revival and development of medieval Scholasticism in Roman Catholic theology and philosophy. *Neo-Scholastic Thomism* or *Neo-Thomism* narrows down the perspective on the reviving of the study of Thomas Aquinas. It must be clear, however, that Leo’s intention was not to establish one single school. Indeed, among the lasting positive results of his call has been the publication of critical editions of Aquinas and of many other medieval thinkers. Nor did Neo-Scholasticism lack original philosophers, such as Étienne Gilson (1884–1978) and Jacques Marit-

¹⁰ JOS DECORTE: Ter inleiding, in Nicolaas van Cusa: *Godsdienstvrede*, Pelckmans, Kapellen, 2000, pp. 7–46, here p. 36. I back up the claim that the *manuductive* concern is indeed central to Nicholas’s thought with successive examination of such important Cusanian works as *De Docta Ignorantia*, *De Coniecturis*, *De Visione Dei*, *De Deo Abscondito*, *De Possess* and *De Non-Aliud*. See GERGELY BAKOS: *Faith, Rationality* op. cit., pp. 149–196.

¹¹ For an English translation of the encyclical see http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_04081879_aeterni-patris.html (July 22nd, 2015).

ain (1882–1873) – both of whom became influential in the US through their lectures. Neo-Scholasticism was also in dialogue with contemporary science and philosophy: for instance at the Institute of Philosophy at Leuven, Belgium natural science was also taught and the Jesuit Karl Rahner (1904–1984) engaged Heidegger’s thought. It must be added that the systematic character of much of Neo-Scholasticism is to be highly appreciated as its thinkers were aiming at a unity and exact conceptual framework (German *Begrifflichkeit*).¹²

This project has nevertheless some philosophical problems. An overall reliance on an Aristotelian ontology, i.e. a substance-metaphysics is problematic at least for two reasons. The emphasis on the *substance* or *ουσια*, as the self-sustained core of reality with the accompanying table of categories pushed the concept of relation into the background. The anthropological problem thus emerging is the following: *Can we really think of a human being as a substance, i.e. as a reality first and foremost standing on its own?* A more theological problem also arises: *Can we think of the Trinitarian God within such a framework where substance has priority over against relation?*

Another problematic point can be already seen from Leo’s encyclical, namely that Thomas’s thought was taken as an intellectual weapon to be wielded in a battle. This was surely a reinterpretation of the medieval Thomas: in his own age Aquinas was not so much regarded as the great figure of synthesizing between Aristotelianism and Christianity, solving the problem posed by a pagan philosophy but was rather perceived as a part of the problem itself.¹³ It must be granted that Thomas was a good summarizer of much of medieval thinking – and he was much more than that: a great systematic thinker, one bold enough to learn from Aristotelian philosophy. His adoption of Aristotelian thought into Christianity must be valued at least for two reasons. First, Aristotle’s was the only philosophical system that was available in Europe at that time. Secondly, its down-to-earth, realistic character recommended it for usage. But, as Nicholas of Cusa put it, you cannot think the divine mystery while using Aristotelian terms.¹⁴ The whole Christian tradition of negative and mystical theology reminds us of this same dimension. Later, during the council of Trent (1545–1563) Thomas’s works received special attention. However, using any thinker as a tool for apologetics has its own danger, i.e. a simplification of his or her thought.

After this very concise overview of Neo-Scholastic thought I contend that both the main strength *and* the weakness of the *Neo-Scholastics* lay in their quest for a “Christian philosophy”. This was an apologetic quest, a reaction against the perceived enemy of theological “*modernism*”.¹⁵ In such a battle Thomism can be easily transformed into a *theological rationalism* facing scientific rationalism as its enemy. No wonder that

¹² See e.g. WALTER BRUGGER: *Philosophisches Wörterbuch*, Herder, Freiburg in Breisgau, 1976. Balázs Mezei, editor of the Hungarian translation of this work points out (in WALTER BRUGGER: *Filozófiai lexikon*, Szent István Társulat, Budapest, 2005, p. 5) the systematic character of its entries as the special strength of this lexicon.

¹³ Cf. the famous condemnation at Paris in 1277. See e.g. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/condemnation/> – July 22nd, 2015.

¹⁴ See his *Li Non-Aliud* in JASPER HOPKINS (trans.): *Nicholas of Cusa on God as Not-Other. A Translation and an Appraisal of De Li Non Aliud*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1979.

¹⁵ “Modernism” did not refer to a specific, unitary movement. It was rather a kind of catchall term. See the corresponding entry in GEOFFREY W. BROMILEY and others (eds.): *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, Brill, Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, UK / Leiden / Boston, 2003; or the more concise discussion in RICHARD P. MCBRIEN and others (eds.): *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1995. The latter work on p. 878 reads: “Rather than a system, Modernism was an intellectual orientation of Catholics who wrestled with the questions posed by modernity.” The

Neo-Scholastics were as much determined by a modern, scientific world-view as the enemy they set out to fight. They reconstructed their own version of Thomist thought in order to fight—for the most part—rather desperate cultural battles. Even though *Neo-Thomist* thought has not yet completely disappeared from the academic world, one can argue that nowadays at least in its traditional form it became rather obsolete and isolated. Basically, one has to agree with Philip Rosemann's following judgement: "*there is no point in flogging a dead horse. For Neo-Scholasticism is dead; mainly [...] because it lost the institutional support of the Catholic Church after the Second Vatican council.*"¹⁶ Since Rosemann's is obviously a sociological-historical assessment of the facts, in the foregoing I have tried to show that Neo-Scholastic thought faces some truly philosophical problems as well.

Even if one shares with Scholastics an appreciation for the religious inspiration and content of medieval thought, it should be maintained that the researcher focusing on the *formal* or *practical* aspect can avoid more easily the danger of interpreting medieval thought according to the standards set by modern science. Two dangers more easily avoided in this way are a narrow, rationalistic interpretation of medieval texts and theological rationalism generally.

2.2. On the Analytic Approach

Analytic philosophy, on the other hand, have had from the beginning the advantages of a more modest philosophical enterprise. The analytic philosopher can be content with analyzing medieval texts with the all the technical finesse of modern logic and semantic analysis. "*Ever since I abandoned the philosophy of Kant and Hegel, I have sought solutions of philosophical problems by means of analysis; and I remain firmly persuaded, in spite of some modern tendencies to the contrary, that only by analyzing is progress possible*", writes Bertrand Russel, one of the founding fathers of the analytic tradition.¹⁷

It is worth of a note that both the interests and the methods of medieval scholastic thinkers and that of 20th century analytic philosophers have much in common. Scholastic thought was fairly "analytic" in its actual execution. Thus in this respect there is a whole field of study for example in the comparison between modern symbolic logic and the scholastic *Summae logicae*, i.e. their textbooks on logic. It should also be noted that in spite of its origins in the Vienna circle there is a respectable part of analytic philosophy dedicated to *rational theology* as demonstrated in the works of Alvin Plantinga or Richard Swinburne. One can also speak of Aquinas's reception in the Analytic Tradition.¹⁸

Beyond any doubt an important positive feature of both Scholastic and analytical philosophy lies in their argumentative style, namely a shared emphasis on the use of

same encyclopedia also gives the following warning: "*the religious questions raised by modernity have not yet received their definite answers.*"

¹⁶ Cf. PHILIP W. ROSEMAN: Introduction. A Change of Paradigm, in: Id: *Understanding Scholastic Thought with Foucault*, Macmillan, Hampshire, 1999, pp. 1–17, here p. 4.

¹⁷ BERTRAND RUSSEL: *My Philosophical Development*, Unwin Paperbacks, London, 1985, p. 11. Cf. also his *The Philosophy of Leibniz*, Routledge, London, 1992, p. 8: "*That all sound philosophy should begin with an analysis of propositions, is a truth too evident, perhaps, to demand a proof.*" This second statement is obviously more nuanced, albeit it makes plausible that Russel might have had some awareness of the arbitrariness of his own position, nonetheless he refused to confront it.

¹⁸ See Elizabeth Anscombe, Peter Geach, Anthony Kenny, and especially John Haldane and "Analytic Thomism".

logic. A traditional view associates analytic philosophy with the so-called *linguistic turn* in the philosophy of the 20th century, though in its later developments one can perhaps speak of a *post-linguistic phase*. However, the *analytic style* is not to be mistaken as it “*tends to precision and thoroughness about a narrow topic and to deemphasize the imprecise or cavalier discussion of broad topics.*”¹⁹

Because of its well-defined and seemingly modest character, the analytic style should be recommended to anyone trying to learn about philosophy. Precisely the same modesty, however, can make the analytic philosopher blind to other, less apparent dimensions of medieval thought. In this way – just as in the case of Neo-Scholasticism – the strength *and* the weakness of the analytic approach are also connected to each other. When one identifies philosophical problems in a medieval text by applying the standards of modern analytic philosophy, the specific historical character of past discussions can easily escape our attention. Avoiding sweeping generalizations, cavalier statements and narrowing down the discussion can be accompanied by a lack of attention to the context. And it is all too evident that it is possible to miss the whole of a forest because of our exclusive attention to individual trees.

A famous example from the history of modern science illustrates well what is at stake here. In a letter of dedication to pope Paul III (r. 1534–1549), the astronomer Nicholas Copernicus (1473–1543) declared that science has the right and the obligation to describe reality as it is. Moreover, this even holds, if this description should clash with Holy Scripture. The objective of the Bible is, however, not scientific knowledge, rather it follows the usual way people talk.²⁰ Note that Copernicus was not only a mathematician and an astronomer but also a canon of the Roman Catholic Church. His main scientific work entitled “*De revolutionibus orbium caelestium*” was published in 1543, i.e. in the year of his death. Because of a serious illness, he had no real control on the publication. Through the unfortunate intervention of a Protestant theologian, Andreas Osiander (1498–1552), Copernicus’ famous book was issued with an anonymous preface, although the preface was neither signed, nor authorized by the author. Thus everyone could read the preface as Copernicus’ own text.

Consequently, Copernicus’ work was received by his contemporaries as only offering a new model of reality and not actually describing how reality works. According to Osiander, namely, theology does have the job of describing reality, while science is only concerned with appearances.²¹ Scientific description is not necessarily a description of how things are, the “true” interpretation of reality is given in theology. Consequently, on this view, there exist two “truths”, to be found respectively on different levels and that is the reason why there can be no real contradiction between them.

This whole incident gives us a rather important warning: even studying a text of a hard science such as mathematical astronomy must be accompanied with the careful study of its story – in this case, its publication. By way of generalizing this point one can say that every author necessarily speaks from a certain context and in order to understand his or her message it is necessary to reconstruct that particular context.

¹⁹ The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/analytic/> – April 2nd, 2015.

²⁰ In this context Copernicus referred to the fourth-century Christian apologist Lactantius’s dictum: “*Astronomy is written for astronomers*” (*Revolutions*, 5). Cf. SHEILA RABIN: Nicolaus Copernicus, in Edward N. Zalta (ed.): *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2015 Edition, URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/copernicus/>>. (April 4th, 2014.)

²¹ “*Since he [the astronomer] cannot in any way attain to the true causes, he will adopt whatever suppositions enable the motions to be computed correctly from the principles of geometry for the future as well as for the past ...these hypotheses need not be true nor even probable*” (*Revolutions*, xvi, as quoted in SHEILA RABIN: Nicolaus Copernicus, op. cit. (April 4th, 2015.)

Fortunately, there are philosophers in the analytic camp who have recognized the importance of contextualization, and by consequence, of the history of their subject. Alasdair MacIntyre's (1929–) following judgement should not come as a surprise:

“It thus turns out that, just as the achievements of the natural sciences are in the end to be judged in terms of achievements of the history of those sciences, so the achievements of philosophy are in the end to be judged in terms of the achievements of the history of philosophy.”²²

As it is well known MacIntyre takes the same approach in his famous *After Virtue*.²³ It was thus no coincidence that historians criticized this book because for them it was too philosophical, while analytic philosophers criticized it precisely because they found the argument too historical.

Another example of a thinker coming from the analytical tradition and recognizing its limitations is Richard Rorty (1931–2007). I mention him especially because he belongs to postmodernity and also because to some extent I share his philosophical concern. Moreover, I find his approach similar to the one I am to propose.

As Rorty famously put it: “*Anglo-American philosophy has been repeating the history it has been refusing to read, and we need all the help we can get to break out of the time capsule within which we are gradually sealing ourselves.*”²⁴ Clearly, the history of philosophy has a special philosophical significance for this American philosopher. Moreover, for Rorty contemporary philosophy at its best should be *edifying*. He writes the following:

“The attempt to edify (ourselves and others) may consist in the hermeneutic activity of making connections between our own culture and some exotic culture or historical period [...], the attempt to reinterpret our familiar surroundings in the unfamiliar terms of our new inventions.”²⁵

For Rorty this *edifying philosophy* is neither *foundational* nor *constructive*. It involves a “*poetic*” activity of “*thinking up new ways, new aims, or new disciplines*”. The reinterpretation of the familiar is called here “*the inverse of hermeneutics.*”

Edification, of course, comes from 19th century bourgeois culture, especially from the German concept of *Bildung*. This concept can be seen an important bridge between Rorty's and my approach.²⁶ However, for Rorty his “*project of finding new, better,*

²² ALASDAIR MACINTYRE: “The relationship of philosophy to its past”, in *Philosophy in History. Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy*, Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (eds.): University Press, Cambridge, 1984, pp. 30-48, here p. 47. I am grateful for this reference to Paul Richard Blum, T. J. Higgins, S.J., Chair in Philosophy, at Loyola University, Baltimore, Maryland. Blum has written a related paper on the history of philosophy and it is expected to be published soon in Hungarian. (The title of the German manuscript reads “Antworten und Fragen. Die Historizität philosophisches Denkens”.)

²³ ALASDAIR MACINTYRE: *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1984².

²⁴ RICHARD RORTY: *Derrida on Language, Being, and Abnormal Philosophy*, in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 74, No. 11 (Seventy-Fourth Annual Meeting American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division Nov., 1977), pp. 673-681, here 676.

²⁵ RICHARD RORTY: *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, University Press, Princeton, 1979, p. 394. Emphasis added.

²⁶ Rorty, in this respect, was conscious of his own debt to Hans-Georg Gadamer and the latter's hermeneutic philosophy see *ibid.*, p. 357.

*more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking*²⁷ seems to be disconnected from the question of truth seeking and referentiality.²⁸

It is my philosophical conviction that a solid *epistemological realism* is necessary in the following sense: what we are aiming and will arrive at during our reading of a medieval text is not a personal whim, a fanciful idea or an individual invention. Because of the historical distance between us and the Middle Ages and the cultural changes that have taken place the medieval world does seem to us “*exotic*” – as Rorty put it.²⁹ But any reinterpretation of our own surroundings with the help of some exotic concepts should really contribute to finding our own way in this world we inhabit. As the medievals would put: it should make us happier, wiser, more human.

I think both MacIntyre’s and Rorty’s example clearly illustrate that within our contemporary academic context the analytic way of handling philosophical problems is only one possibility. At the very least it seems unlikely that this approach alone could exhaust the philosophical meaning of medieval texts.

2.3. *The Intellectual Historian and the Hermeneutical Approach*

From the foregoing one can gather that the approach I am proposing ought to be less apologetic than Neo-Scholasticism, without being merely analytical. My remarks on the context and the references to MacIntyre and Rorty all point towards a more historically minded and hermeneutical research.

There is naturally nothing new in the *history of ideas* or German *Geistesgeschichte*. Our contemporary *intellectual historian* has what can be called a more *hermeneutically* minded methodology in emphasizing the importance of the *historical context* for understanding a philosophical debate or a particular position. Much of contemporary research into medieval thought displays a similar humility. One is not interested in crude generalizations. Sweeping statements are to be wisely avoided. Caution is called forth against vain attempts to actualize medieval thought hastily and unwittingly.

Yet writing any kind of intellectual history obviously runs the risk of becoming merely antiquarian or simply self-serving.³⁰ An *antiquarian attitude* would mean reading the past only for its own sake and consciously or unconsciously avoiding raising any question of its contemporary relevance. Our own reading of the medievals should, of course, aim at objectivity and contextualization is a necessary support for that. However, a really objective reading has to realize our own historical situation and our special presuppositions framing our own questions. Precisely because of the cultural gap separating us from the Middle Ages we should not venture mindlessly into interpretation. If one does this consciously, the question of actualization of a special text can be delayed, put off temporarily as it were, for methodical reasons. Nevertheless, sooner or later one

²⁷ Ibid. p. 360.

²⁸ Cf. DON IHDE: Epilogue: Response to Rorty, or Is Phenomenology Edifying?, in: Id.: *Consequences of Phenomenology*, State University of New York Press, 1986, pp. 181–198, here: p. 197.

²⁹ Although I think, actually, Rorty might have had some other cultures in mind.

³⁰ Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche: *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen II: Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben*, § 1, in GIORGIO COLLI – MAZZINO MONTINARI (eds.): *Kritische Studienausgabe*, volume 1, dtv, München, 1999, pp. 243–334. (For an English translation see FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE: *Untimely Meditations. On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*, (transl. by Ian C. Johnston), 1874: <http://la.utexas.edu/users/hcleaver/330T/350kPEENietzscheAbuseTableAll.pdf> – 4th April 2015.) This writing from Nietzsche clearly influenced Decorte, see JOS DECORTE: *Geschichte und Eschatologie*, op. cit.

will have to face this question – if for nothing else, because our students keep asking it: “*Why to study this text? What does this have to do with us here and now?*”³¹

Self-serving or *self-absorbed* I would call any reading of the past that would be generally satisfied with the conclusion that today we could and indeed do know better. Such an interpretation, in effect, amounts to say that the only gain to be had from our studies is to see the follies of past ages and the reflection of the brightness of our own intelligence.

Finally, any interpretation can be considered *weak, faint-hearted* or simply – to use a medieval term – *vain (vana)*, if it fails to raise the question of truth and contemporary philosophical and existential relevance. After all, in our scientific-pragmatic culture the study of philosophy in general, but that of medieval philosophy in particular seems to need some justification. We are not medievals: theology is not seen any more as the queen of sciences and philosophy as her handmaid (*ancilla theologiae*). In other words, philosophy does not have the same prestige of exercising the noblest human activity any more as it used to be seen both during antiquity and the Middle Ages. Our contemporaries do not regard philosophical activity as practicing the highest theological virtue, i.e. Christian charity or as the highest human possibility, i.e. contemplation. I am aware that today at least within some contexts the very legitimacy of philosophy is called into question.³²

Finally, a last problem with the history of ideas and the hermeneutical approach must be mentioned here. Whenever the question of truth is pushed all too easily to the background, this study alone can lead to *historical relativism*.³³

2.4. *An Existential Hermeneutics*

The *Decortian hermeneutics* goes further than these other approaches in as much as its practitioner – while being able to appreciate and even profit from all the aforementioned approaches – must also reflect on the *existential importance of medieval knowledge*.

Philosophy as represented by those great names listed at the very beginning of my paper – together with many others such as the Epicureans, the Stoics, the Existentialists, the entire Phenomenological movement and even Kant – must in the end reconnect us to reality, to human life.³⁴ This is a tough call even to a teacher in any class on philosophy, but this seems especially difficult in relation to medieval thought. For instance the very formulations and conventions of the university genre of the *quaestio* can conceal the existential stakes and interests of a particular philosophical or theological problem.

³¹ Contemporary biblical studies offer a similar challenge of a very learned, but antiquarian interpretation: the danger of alienating the text from us even more than a direct, unschooled reading would do. One might think one has learned every single detail one is able to gather concerning the text and its history but meanwhile its meaning evaporates. In such a case our historical study has only made the past to appear more incomprehensible to us.

³² This seems to be true as well in the US as in Hungary – albeit possibly for different reasons.

³³ A similar danger seems to be present in Rorty’s thought.

³⁴ Cf. in this respect Kant’s famous stance towards philosophy in its *cosmopolitan* sense: after having answered all the three main questions of speculative philosophy – i.e. *What can I know? What can I hope for? What shall I do?* – there still remains the task of answering the essential question: *What does it mean to be human?*

My bottom line here is the conviction that knowledge seen from a medieval point of view must necessarily have an importance for one's life. That is what we can learn from medievals. As they themselves could have put it, otherwise all our attempts aiming at true knowledge are either vanity, i.e. *vanitas* or an instance of (intellectual) pride, i.e. *superbia*. Besides the *existential-practical* orientation of medieval thought, its essentially *symbolic-religious* and *teleological* character needs special emphasis. Knowledge for a medieval is essentially about seeing God, i.e. *visio Dei* and attaining happiness, i.e. *beatitudo* – notably already in this earthly life. By focusing on these dimensions of medieval thought, one will become not only more attentive to historical reality but one shall also realize that the same issues are still with us – even if nowadays they usually remain silent during academic discussions.

This is an important point, because in spite of the huge cultural differences, medievals and we, moderns or post-moderns still inhabit the same human world. Sometimes, we are confronted with the same basic problems. This does not entail that we will always and necessarily have exactly the same answers, but it is possible that we can learn something from medieval questions and from the ways medievals answered those questions. Particularly, the questions concerning the existential-practical importance or the aim of knowledge for human life are still meaningful today. Nor has the symbolic dimension been completely silenced. An important advantage of the approach I am proposing lies in its sensitivity to these dimensions.

Our Western intellectual tradition as a whole has had the tendency both to conceive and prefer knowledge as rather *theoretical* and *speculative*. This tendency can be detected from Greek thinkers like Parmenides and Plato, through modern philosophers like Kant up to a phenomenologist like Edmund Husserl. In the course of the past century several important thinkers, such as Gilbert Ryle, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, Michael Polanyi and Michel Foucault have pointed us toward a less *intellectualistic* picture. We have learned to see knowledge as both *theoretical and practical*. As both Heidegger and MacIntyre remind us this practice-related understanding of rationality is already to be found in the ethical works of no less of a thinker than Aristotle himself.

Turning to medieval thought, the Wittgensteinian concept of *background practices* can and must be applied. Usually these get hardly mentioned in the medieval texts themselves, yet medievals were well aware of them. The famous phrase *faith seeking understanding (fides quaerens intellectum)* from Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) means that the medieval intellectual was conscious of his own commitment to a specific way of life and to a specific community. He did not pretend to start from a default position and then try to reach a commitment through his thinking alone. Even some aspects of his own commitment, i.e. some dimensions of the medieval life world could be called into question and criticized – as long as this fundamental commitment was maintained.

To be mindful concerning medieval background practices both in their more general and more particular forms are also important because they may make us understand much better the significance of medieval questions. *Why to ponder, for instance, the issue whether Christ had a purse or not?* Behind this seemingly petty, if not ridiculous exegetical debate there stood the whole opposition and struggle between Mendicant and secular university professors and their respective rights to preach and to get paid.³⁵

³⁵ One might phrase the same question in terms of tenure and funding nowadays.

In some cases, this silent or *tacit dimension* – to use a Polanyian phrase – can have direct philosophical significance. This ought to be especially clear concerning the so-called arguments for the existence of God in the Middle Ages. *What could possibly have been the point to prove the existence of God in a deeply religious culture?* Sure enough, not everyone was well-informed about the doctrines of Christianity. There were indeed heretical people opposing certain religious doctrines. There were even some Jews and Moslems around. And to state the obvious not everyone was living faithfully to the tenets of Christianity. Yet, sociologically or culturally there was hardly any possibility to be a sceptic, an agnostic or an atheist during the Middle Ages. *So, within such a context what could have been the significance of proving the existence of God?*

Here one should recall the Anselmian phrase *faith seeking understanding* and one should read Anselm's own arguments in his *Monologion* and *Proslogion* – i.e. reading them in their entirety not just those bits and pieces featuring in our philosophy textbooks. There one finds the evidence that Anselm was well aware of the somewhat revolutionary character of his thought: he was explicitly asked by his own students to write on theology relying only on rational argumentation. The point for Anselm and for medievals in general was *epistemological* rather than purely ontological: through their faith they “knew” – or were at least convinced – that God existed, nevertheless they wanted to know how much of their faith could be rationalized, in other words how far human reason could reach. They were testing their own rationality on the deepest puzzles of existence. Familiarity with their argumentations will show that there were many differing perspectives on the question. Aquinas, for instance, famously objected to Anselm's “ontological” argument, while the very first critic of that argument was already a contemporary of Anselm, a fellow Benedictine monk, Gaunilo of Marmoutiers.³⁶

Several of Anselm's and Aquinas's work also demonstrate the *existential* character of knowledge. That is to say knowledge for medievals must be related to *salvation, happiness or human flourishing*. Consider, for instance the very medieval term “*scientia*” from which our contemporary word “*science*” comes. Surely it meant science, but not simply natural science. It could refer to any rationally ordered body of knowledge. In this sense theology was as much of a “science” as was philosophy. However, *scientia* was also synonymous with *wisdom (sapientia)*. The “*sacra scientia*” of theology was not to be concerned with theory for the sake of theory but with theory for the sake of the practice of faith, i.e. the life of the believer and the Church. At least ideally theology as the queen of sciences had to be practical, pastoral and spiritual. This practice oriented model of science was also operative throughout other, strictly speaking non-theological enterprises such as e.g. history, economy or medicine. The following quotation from Paul's *Letter to the Romans* did not only feature in theological treatises:

„For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine

³⁶ One can wonder on the significance of the following facts: there lived a Benedictine reader who criticized Anselm's thought in written form, apart from his criticism and name nothing else is known concerning this individual, yet Anselm did not only reply to this criticism but both Gaunilo's counter-argument and Anselm's reply have been published together. Richard William Southern in his great monography on Anselm calls Gaunilo “*truly remarkable*” and points out that the controversy between him and Anselm “was conducted with such mutual regard and identity of purpose that it is hard to realize that a new philosophical issue had suddenly sprung into existence.” See R.W. SOUTHERN: *Saint Anselm. A portrait in a Landscape*, University Press, Cambridge, p. 113.

nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.”³⁷

This text speaking about the Gentiles and their failure to recognize God points toward the possibility, indeed the necessity of seeing the invisible through and within the visible beings of the created world. In medieval art – throughout architecture and paintings – the same movement can be perceived as leading from the visible towards the invisible. One very clear example would be the Church of Saint Denis at Paris – considered to be the first Gothic church—as documented by Abbot Suger (1081–1151).

Yet, medievals were aware of the fact that to achieve this “vision” of God, i.e. seeing, knowing something from the invisible within and through the visible is far from being an easy enterprise. It needs a special “finesse”: to express it with a medieval term it is a question of *sapientia* (*wisdom*) or to say it with Ryle it involves a certain *knowing how*. This knowing how is related to a basic symbolic structure:

$$S - X \rightarrow Y.$$

Within this structure, for the human subject S the visible X is a sign or symbol of or a pointer towards the reality of an invisible Y. Note that this epistemological structure is strongly religious – after all God, being the greatest invisible, cannot be present in any other way only indirectly, i.e. through the help of the visible.

However, the same symbolic sensitivity is needed when one encounters the *ethical* and the *ecological* realms or even in the experience of *human relationships* and *humor* – not to mention *art*. In all these fields of our existence in some sense we are called to see beyond the surface, to transcend the obvious and the banal and to recognize something deeper, less superficial and less direct. We take a smile as an expression of gentleness or a frown as a sign of boredom. We can hear the birds singing in Vivaldi’s Four seasons, although in fact there are only instruments there playing the scores. We see a TV ad for aiding the third world showing a sick and starving child and we connect and feel responsible. We are struck by the beauty of air, land, sea and saddened by their pollution and destruction through human hands, and a recognition dawns on us of immense loss and guilt. We look lovingly on others and through the eyes of our love we – parents, grandparents, teachers, friends, and lovers – can see more in them than they themselves presently are able to acknowledge: we see their best possibilities. We watch a situation, listen to a remark or tell a joke and experience a hidden comicality, the space, freedom, and relief of good humor. All these examples strongly suggest that the symbolic experience is fundamental to our humanity. Yet it is equally true that in our contemporary culture this symbolic dimension is threatened to be lost because of the predominance of so-called scientific objective knowledge and short-term oriented rationality.

Reference has already been made to the medieval vision of reality having a teleological character. In this respect the medieval universe was an Aristotelian one structured by a thoroughgoing finalistic order. In this ordered cosmos every single being had its goal and all these goals were connected with each other – even if important details of this teleology remained hidden from humans. This last specifying clause signals the fact that Aristotelian physics and ontology together with ancient cosmology were supporters of this vision only in a secondary sense. They should be seen as the best theo-

³⁷ Romans 1:19-20.

retical explanations of natural phenomena that were available at that time. More fundamentally, though, this kind of scientific theory was an expression of a fundamental Christian and human intuition, i.e. the presence of meaning in the world.

That is the reason why Aristotelian teleology and medieval cosmology should not represent insurmountable problems for us today. Modern science heavily relies on mathematics and there is no way mathematics can make sense of and employ the concepts of aim, goal, finality or the good.³⁸ Consequently, modern science leaves this question out of consideration, since it simply cannot be dealt with through a scientific methodology.

Yet when one studies the human world – for instance while doing psychology or sociology – one has to acknowledge that we humans are driven by goals and values. It is a very human thing to see reality and ask the question of the meaning of a particular situation. As Viktor E. Frankl has shown us asking and answering the question of meaning – *pace* Freud – is a very healthy enterprise and indeed a therapeutic exercise. As Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche put it “*He who has a Why to live for can bear almost any How.*”³⁹ Yet, Nietzsche failed to recognize that values, meanings and goals are not simply created by us as it were out of nothing. Meanings cannot be reasonably forced onto anyone; rather they have to be recognized and internalized by the human subject himself or herself. Only in this sense are they subjective. Yet in the very experience of these values, goals and meanings they present themselves as being encountered and discovered and not as arbitrarily invented but as possessing some objective status. Max Scheler and Nicolai Hartmann both argued for this; and MacIntyre in his *After Virtue* seems to be making the same point in relation to what he calls *practices*.⁴⁰ Consequently, teleology cannot be left out of consideration.

Finally, beside the Aristotelian dimension of medieval thinking its Platonic dimension should be reconsidered. In Plato there is a sense of a certain teleology, a directness towards the Good that seems less rigorously “scientific” and more suggestive. Through the writings of the church fathers the Platonic tradition has heavily influenced the Middle Ages. This tradition points toward a surplus of meaning within and beyond the confines of the visible universe. The symbolic presence founds also ample expression in this kind of thinking.

³⁸ It is all the more interesting to see that some notion of teleology seems to be creeping back through the backdoor, as it were, into recent biology and cosmology.

³⁹ Cf. FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE: *Götzen Dämmerung oder Wie man mit dem Hammer philosophiert*, in GIORGIO COLLI – MAZZINO MONTINARI (eds.): *Kritische Studienausgabe*, volume 1, op. cit., pp.55 –161, here 60-61. This dictum was one of Frankl’s favorite.

⁴⁰ Op. cit. 175: “By a **practice** I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. Tic-tac-toe is not an example of a **practice** in this sense, nor is throwing a football with skill; but the game of football is, and so is chess. Bricklaying is not a **practice**; architecture is. Planting turnips is not a **practice**; farming is. So are the enquiries of physics, chemistry and biology, and so is the work of the historian, and so are painting and music.” [Emphasis from the author.]

2.5. Comparison of the Different Approaches

To Neo-Thomism

A Decortian existential hermeneutics can respect the Aristotelian framework of medieval thought precisely as a framework, without, however, being committed to it. Notably this approach enables one to think humans as fundamentally relational.⁴¹ By laying the emphasis on the knowing how it avoids the danger of (theological) rationalism.

While this approach is not directly or overtly apologetic, one might still wonder whether it qualifies as a kind of Christian philosophy. The short answer to this question is that this existential hermeneutics is certainly inspired by medieval Christianity, but it is not simply Christian in virtue of the fact that it reflects on or endorses certain Christian themes or doctrines. Rather its first emphasis lies on the *formal* aspect of knowledge, i.e. on questions of *how to go about one's knowledge, how to use it, how to relate to it, how to contribute with it to human well-being, virtue and maturity*. Thus if my Decortian hermeneutics is a *Christian philosophy* then it is Christian first and foremost in this *formal* sense of the expression.⁴²

A more serious objection concerns the philosophical status and dimension of this approach. That is to ask the question whether a Decortian hermeneutics can be still autonomous philosophy. After all, even Christian sources confirm that the experience of the *visio Dei* is ultimately dependent on divine grace. *Does this circumstance pose no threat to philosophy as autonomous human thinking?*

This problem needs a complex answer. First, one should be reminded that the present paper is mainly concerned with a way of making (existential) sense of (medieval) philosophical texts. Furthermore, the *visio* in this life discussed briefly is neither the ultimate eschatological *beatitudo*, nor some parapsychological state of mind. First and foremost it is an intelligent – that is to say not irrational – insight into reality. While no *visio Dei* is possible without the gift of divine grace, according to Paul's *Letter to the Romans* it is a basic human possibility – even for non-Christians as the Apostle emphasized it.⁴³ Since this *visio* is nothing else than a limited insight into the mystery of being here and now (*in via*), it is possible to work towards it already in this life, within this world.⁴⁴ It should be especially emphasized that God in Godself is not the exclusive target of the symbolic vision. Indeed, the realm of other possible targets offers an infinite field for investigation: God in creatures, ethical values, human relationships, humor, art, etc.⁴⁵

To Analytic Philosophy

Decortian hermeneutics is able to profit from philosophical analysis, but in my opinion it gives a more full-fledged form to philosophical modesty. Narrowing down the discussion through logical or linguistic analysis can in fact function as a counterfeit sort of

⁴¹ Cf. *beatitudo, visio Dei*.

⁴² Thus in its own philosophical way Decortian hermeneutics is a humble protest “*against that coarse familiarity with sacred things which is busy on the lip, and idle in the heart*” as Charles Dickens so poignantly put it in his *Preface to the First Cheap Edition of Pickwick Papers* (see <http://dickensprints.com/book-titles/the-pickwick-papers/authors-preface.html> – July 22nd, 2015).

⁴³ See the quotation in section 2.4. of the present paper.

⁴⁴ Cf. the possibility and justifiability of rational theology and philosophical ethics in Christianity.

⁴⁵ I am grateful for Balázs Mezei for raising these two objections.

modesty, i.e. a polite way of avoiding certain otherwise important questions.⁴⁶ I think both MacIntyre's and Rorty's works confirm this point. The approach I am proposing is certainly sensitive to the historical-cultural context and in this it is similar to Rorty's approach. The difference lies in the fact that the existential hermeneutics is committed to epistemological realism. However connection to Rorty is important to me, since it offers the possibility of a truly philosophical appreciation of postmodernity.

To Intellectual History / Hermeneutics

My comparison with Rorty's example has already pointed toward that appreciation of history and a clearer focus on *the existential dimension*. Its connection to real life is evident and this circumstance fends off any kind of Nietzschean criticism.

Admittedly, *historical relativism* still remains an open question, but precisely for my approach it appears less of a problem. Truth here is tested in and through *existence*. This anchoring of truth on the existential level, in the *knowing how* secures one's position and fends off historical relativism. The *visio* aimed at can indeed only be a *limited insight* into the mystery, but nevertheless it is a valid one. To put it with Nicolaus Cusanus: it is a conjecture (*coniectura*).⁴⁷

⁴⁶ I thank István Fehér M. and Balázs Mezei for reminding me of this point.

⁴⁷ On Cusanian conjecture see his *De coniecturis*, for an English translation consult <http://jasper-hopkins.info/DeConi12-2000.pdf> – July 22nd, 2015.