

Catholic philosophy: marginal player or éminence grise?

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Abstract: Many subspecies of philosophy have complained about being marginalised and ignored by mainstream analytic philosophy – feminist, Asian, phenomenological, Marxist, and others. One of the oldest players in this aggrieved discourse has been Catholic philosophy. Provided with institutional support from the Church for eight centuries, it has flourished in seminaries and some Catholic universities but has felt sidelined by the wider philosophical world. It denies that it relies on any theological premises and it has a similar commitment to logic to analytic philosophy, so, in its view, ought to be taken seriously across the board and should be a beneficiary of moves to diversify philosophy.

The talk sketches the most distinctive central theses of Catholic philosophy, in Aristotelian realist metaphysics and objectivist natural law ethics. It compares those with the received ideas of analytic philosophy, and argues that the main Catholic ideas are implicit in, and historically influential in, some strands of mainstream philosophy and in wider philosophically-influenced currents. Examples are the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, anti-positivist philosophy of law, and realist philosophy of science and mathematics.

Here's the plan:

A little about diversity in philosophy in general and the different schools that want a piece of the action; something on the most basic and characteristic theses of Catholic philosophy, mainly Aristotelian metaphysics and objectivist ethics; then a little on how Catholic philosophy has actually worked out, in and out of Australia, and beyond philosophy itself.

Diversity:

There's a plethora of competing voices, all demanding a piece of the action that mainstream analytic philosophy is allegedly hogging:

- Continental (old means Kant and Hegel/new means Foucault, Deleuze and so on)
- Feminist
- Ethno-regional (Chinese, Indian, African...)
- Pragmatist
- Themed (Political philosophy, philosophy of religion, philosophy of science, environmental philosophy etc)

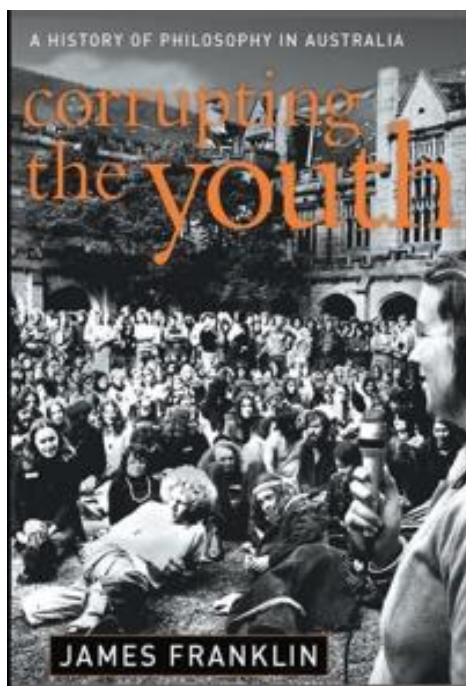
(I don't mention ethics and metaphysics, as they're topics that any school can address; but there's nothing important about what's included and what isn't)

(If I've missed out your favoured school, sorry about that: it looks like your play is not just off-Broadway but off-off-Broadway: you haven't even made it into the *salon des refusés*.)

Now all of these competing traditions will demand diversity and have their own aggrieved discourse; like this complaint from a fan of Chinese philosophy: "Among the top 50 philosophy departments in the U.S. that grant a Ph.D., only four have a member of their regular faculty who teaches Chinese philosophy."¹ There are a lot of those sort of complaints about, many of them justified.

But those various schools are not exactly friends or allies. They are competitors. One appointment for you is one less for me, and there's competition for brain space as well: if someone is persuaded to put effort into understanding say Indian philosophy, they won't have time to grasp pragmatism or whatever. So those traditions usually aren't seen taking much notice of one another. And they do not have much motivation to form an alliance to knock over the *ancien regime* and divide the spoils.

We might pause for a moment to consider if there really is, as public perception has it, a domination of institutional philosophy by an analytic mainstream with penumbra of "outsiders"? Well, I remember when there was. Here's



a picture of 1973... 😊 This depicts the time of the philosophy strike in the Sydney University Quad when Marxism and feminism demanded a place in the curriculum alongside the ruling analytic philosophy – which fought back. The president of the Builders Labourers Federation, Jack Munday, came along to this or a similar meeting and threatened a ban on building at the university if they didn't cave in. That's how we negotiated about diversity in philosophy in those days. Great theatre ...

Now, it's not so clear. A lot of selection committees

have been stacked since then. 😊 This is the listing of staff in philosophy at my university, UNSW, which is a leading Australian university (though not specially

noted in philosophy). Kant and Hegel appear twice, Foucault appears twice; Chinese philosophy once; there's only one strictly analytic philosopher there, and he's retired though still involved. So analytic philosophy is not as dominant as it was. Continental seems to be ruling the roost. But there are still in- and out-groups.



So now Catholic philosophy would like to join the fray and demand a piece of the action.



Catholic philosophy:

You've heard of the Catholic Church. 20% of Australians claim to belong to it and it has a number of colourful and well-known, um, marketing strategies such as Popes, cathedrals, rosaries, saints, nuns and so on. And quite a few dogmas about theology. Also scandals. None of which have much to do with its philosophy.

Let's do the history in just a few sentences. Note that I say Catholic philosophy rather than Christian philosophy. Protestant and Orthodox Christianity have been somewhat suspicious of philosophy, but the Catholic Church has been quite enthusiastic. Medieval universities were Church institutions and took on board the philosophy of Aristotle especially, and his follower Thomas Aquinas became so to speak philosopher "by appointment" to the Catholic Church in the late nineteenth century. His philosophy was widely taught in seminaries in the twentieth century but rarely in secular universities. At present in Australia, that tradition has some influence at the University of Notre Dame Australia and maybe at Australian Catholic University, but not elsewhere. I say "maybe" ACU because they keep employing people and sacking them for no reason, so it's hard to keep up.

The first thing for some tradition that wants attention, obviously, is to explain in simple terms why anyone should take notice. From the perspective of those with no knowledge of it but general philosophical interests, what has that tradition got to offer? How does it connect to the usual questions in philosophy and what distinctive things does it say about them? (You might ask yourself if you have some grasp of what feminist, continental, Chinese etc philosophy has to offer: If you're on the desk advising new students and they ask about any of them, could you give a thumbnail sketch of their perspective?)

Characteristic theses of Catholic philosophy:

Catholic philosophy – regarded as separate and independent from theology – has two main theses: Aristotelian metaphysics and objectivist "natural law" ethics.

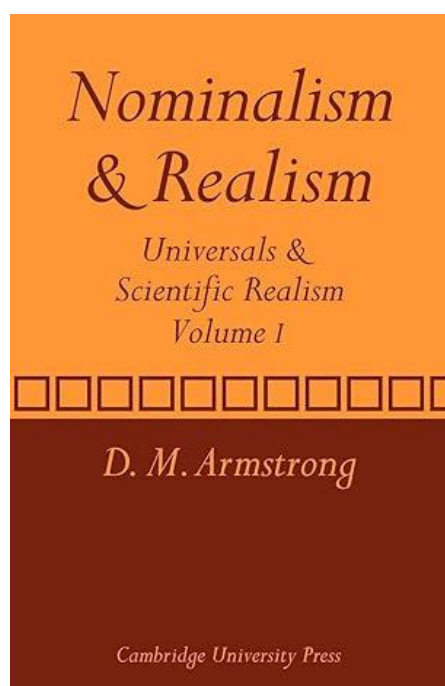
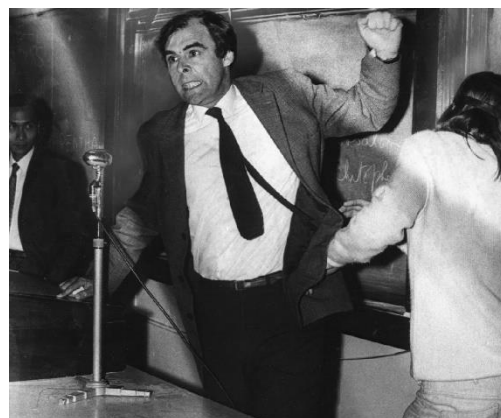
Aristotelian realist metaphysics

Aristotle of course was not Catholic but Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century incorporated most of his basic ideas in what became official Catholic philosophy. Those of other philosophical traditions find it very hard to get Aristotelian realist metaphysics, though it's implicit in science. Take a scientific law like Newton's law of gravitation:

Every body attracts every other body with a force proportional to the masses of the bodies and inversely proportional to the square of the distance between them.

Prima facie – and according to Aristotelians, really – this law relates the *properties* (mass) of some bodies, via some *relation* (distance). It's those properties and relation that have causal force, which is a sign of reality. So the properties and relations (universals) should be interpreted as realistically as the things themselves. They're not just words or concepts, any more than bodies are just words or concepts. They're part of the furniture of reality. And it's the business of science to determine what properties and relations there are and to investigate their interconnections via laws of nature.

In the mid-twentieth century, that sort of realist metaphysics was largely confined to Catholic philosophy, and John Anderson at Sydney University. Since then it's become a big but not dominant strand in analytic philosophy, thanks the work of D.M. Armstrong and others.



Armstrong's book,



with a famous photo of the author at the time he was writing that work, which is not relevant but a great pic.

Let me mention Aristotelian realist philosophy of mathematics. Philosophy of mathematics tends to oscillate between Platonism and nominalism – Platonism holding that it’s about an abstract realm of Platonic entities like numbers and sets, versus nominalism holding that it’s just a language or manipulation of meaningless symbols. Aristotelianism says they’re both wrong and it’s about certain real aspects of the world – quantitative and structural ones.

Here’s the book on it. 😊 The cover illustrates symmetry, a mathematical property that is visible in the real world. There’s nothing Catholic about that – or there shouldn’t be – but experience shows that philosophers who don’t have any background in Aristotelian realism have trouble grasping what it says. They keep thinking philosophy of mathematics must be either Platonist or nominalist.

Objectivist ethics

Part of the point of realist metaphysics is to conclude that ethical properties are as real as scientific ones. That doesn’t follow – Armstrong, for example, thought that scientific properties were real but ethical ones weren’t – but at least realism about scientific properties opens the way for being more serious about realism elsewhere.

Catholic ethics has been committed to a “natural law” view of the topic. That means that ethics follows from the nature of things, especially the nature of humans. For example, the destruction of a human is a tragedy but the explosion of a lifeless galaxy is just a firework, because of the different natures of those entities – humans are genuinely rational, conscious and living, which makes them of more moral significance than lifeless galaxies.

That contrasts with all other major views on ethics. It’s not a divine command theory (like many Protestants hold) – the nature of humans and their moral significance is inherent to them so God could not command that murder is right. It’s unlike evolutionary theories that say ethics is just custom, which has evolved to make society work or some such purpose: it’s more objectivist than that. It’s not exactly either deontological or utilitarian, as it says that both intentions and consequences are morally significant, but offers a story on why.

As is well known, Catholics generally draw from those principles some controversial conclusions concerning bioethical issues like

abortion, euthanasia and contraception. 😊 (The second pic is of the famous Catholic philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe being arrested outside an abortion clinic.) It’s possible to argue that natural law principles don’t imply those conclusions in the forms given. But it is no use replying to those arguments with slogans like “Get your rosaries off our ovaries,” or caricaturing natural law views as saying “If God



had wanted us to fly he would have given us wings.” On a natural law view, that is like trying to do engineering while rejecting the laws of physics. But rather than going into any of those issues, I’ll give a different kind of example where natural law reasoning accords with many people’s intuition.

Suppose, that I have a mid-teenaged daughter. She comes to me and says “Dad, you’ve been supporting me financially for years and now I want to make a contribution. I’m going to take a part-time job at the local sexual services outlet – what you old fogies probably used to call a brothel. Don’t worry, I have a friend who works there and it’s well run, the OH&S guidelines are in place, very safe and hygienic, registered NDIS provider, training is provided. I hope you’ll respect my autonomy, but I’m just checking if it’s OK with you.”

Well, it’s not OK with me. [pause] But how to explain why not? [pause] I am inclined to say something like: look, that’s not what sex is about. It’s for freely sharing with someone you’re excited about, maybe someone you’re committed to. Anyway, selling it for money misses the point of it and so to speak tarnishes it – much like using your philosophy degree to spout bullshit. [pause] If I do say something like that, like “that’s not what sex is for”, I am a natural law theorist about ethics. That example gets to the point of natural law thinking.

“Human dignity”

Now let me start with an example on the theme that a number of ideas widely accepted in current culture make no sense if their Catholic historical and philosophical underpinnings are

discarded. 😊

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights has certainly had a lot of traction, and the rights discourse that it gave such a boost too has energised many people, for example in the downfall of the Soviet Union. Its preamble begins:

“Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world

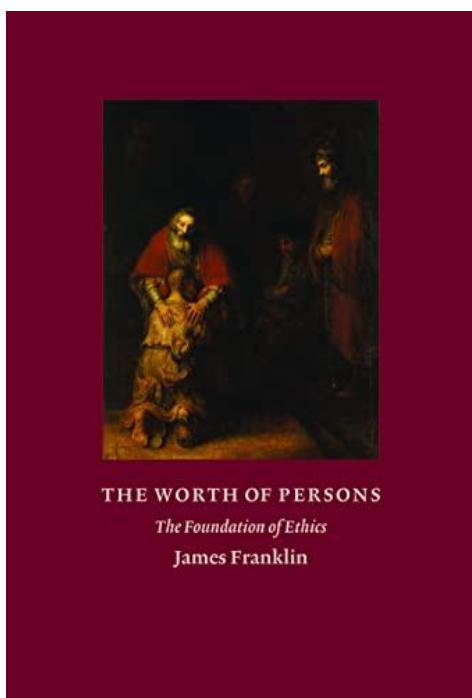
... “ 😊

And Article 1 begins:

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience ...”

What the hell does that talk about dignity and inalienable rights mean? Analytic

philosophers have a view: it doesn’t mean anything. 😊 In a much-cited article, “*Dignity is a useless concept*”, Ruth Macklin says “appeals to dignity are either vague restatements of other, more precise, notions or mere slogans that add nothing” Following her, Steven Pinker’s article “*The stupidity of dignity*” says, “The problem is that ‘dignity’ is a squishy, subjective notion, hardly up to the heavyweight moral demands assigned to it ... Once you recognize the principle of autonomy, Macklin argued, ‘dignity’ adds nothing.” Oxford ethicist



Jeff McMahan writes “the notion of human dignity often functions in moral and political writing as a rhetorical substitute for argument.” Rawls, the top dog in this area, says his concept of justice as fairness, involving an equality of persons, is “political, not metaphysical”, meaning that it’s not a factual claim but a commitment for a political purpose. ~~(though he then needs some fancy footwork to explain why the original position doesn’t apply to cats although it does apply to disabled humans).~~

Those complainers are right, in the sense that a notion of human dignity in any substantial and objective sense is very hard to fit into any version of analytic philosophy. Into Kantian philosophy, maybe, though it would be problematic in later continental philosophy too.

Here's my version, which is approximately Catholic but not totally standard:



~~If you ask where the Universal Declaration got that language, then part of the reason is that it reflects the US Declaration of Independence, which just creates a historical regress, but the other reason is that some of the main drafters of the Declaration were natural law theorists — notably the Lebanese Thomist, Dr Charles Habib Malik (not Catholic though, but Orthodox).~~

éminence grise

I’ll take another example of how ingrained Catholic theory is a kind of *éminence grise* in moral reasoning. In Australia, the 1992 Mabo decision of the High Court, which is probably still Australia’s most famous legal decision, used an objective theory of moral equality of persons to overturn the precedent of *terra nullius* and conclude that indigenous people retained native title after white invasion. The two judges most responsible, Gerard Brennan and William Deane, were Catholic natural law theorists. Deane said explicitly that natural law was relevant to the decision, while Brennan didn’t but had written plenty earlier on how objective moral values ought to and in fact did inform the law.

Catholic philosophy: Room of one’s own or place in the sun?

That gives a sketch of what Catholic philosophy offers and why it deserves to be taken seriously. So what next?

You might say: The Catholic Church has plenty of assets. If it wants to promote philosophy, let it set up its own universities and pay for philosophy departments.

Well, it did that. (And that is fairly unique among major world institutions.) Universities are a

medieval invention and all of them were Catholic universities for centuries. 😊 In his speech at Sydney University in 1986, Pope John Paul said he “recalls with pride the names of so many universities – outstanding examples of intellectual endeavour and human progress – that are her offspring: Paris, Bologna, Padua, Prague, Alcala, Salamanca, Krakow, Oxford and Cambridge.”² – with the implication that Sydney should step up. In Australia, we have had many seminaries that taught Thomist philosophy and there are now two Catholic universities and a liberal arts college, which do make some effort to teach Catholic philosophy. An interesting incident was when Cardinal Pell gave a half-time chair at ACU to Rai Gaita, not Catholic but considered a fellow-traveller.

However, a ghetto is not a place in the sun. Catholic philosophy would like to appear in mainstream universities.

If your department would like to commit to genuine diversity by advertising a position in Catholic philosophy, I am happy to serve on your selection committee.

¹ <https://theconversation.com/chinese-philosophy-is-missing-from-u-s-philosophy-departments-should-we-care-56550>

² https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1986/november/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19861126_educazione-sidney-australia.html