

Article

Grammatical Thomism as Friendly Amendment: Analytic Philosophy and the Interpretation of Aquinas

Matthew Dunch 

Department of Philosophy, Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, IL 60660, USA; mdunch@luc.edu

Abstract

Thomas Aquinas holds a dual role as a profound philosopher and theologian and root of the Thomist thinking that has shaped Catholic thought for centuries. The paper distinguishes four operations through which the Thomist tradition has sustained itself across the centuries—exegesis, translation, application, and friendly amendment. The paper argues that Analytic and Grammatical Thomism share a common genealogy in mid-century Catholic Oxbridge philosophy but a different method. Analytic Thomism translates Thomas's thought into analytic terms and places Thomas in dialog with contemporary philosophy. Grammatical Thomism reorders Thomas's thought to place forms of life and language prior to metaphysics using Wittgenstein's philosophical grammar. The paper defends Grammatical Thomism as a legitimate, though controversial, form of the tradition against the claim that such amendment is a capitulation to other forms of thought rather than a proper extension of Thomism. The paper concludes by examining the substantial and resolute readings of religious language as an example of Thomism engaging with a live debate within the Wittgenstein scholarship.

Keywords: Thomas Aquinas; analytic Thomism; grammatical Thomism; Ludwig Wittgenstein; Herbert McCabe; David Burrell; Stephen Mulhall; Elizabeth Anscombe

1. Introduction

For centuries, Thomism, the tradition carrying forward the thought of Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), has been the most significant institutional standard bearer of Roman Catholic philosophy and theology. In his 1990 Presidential address to the American Catholic Philosophical Association, Gerald McCool, SJ asked whether Thomas's way of philosophizing is still viable today (McCool 1990). While some Thomists would answer, “if done in exactly the same way Thomas did”, most Thomists adapt Thomas's thought to their contexts to a greater or lesser extent so that it remains “viable” within their own social, intellectual, and institutional contexts. In this paper, I argue for the viability of Grammatical Thomism—developed initially by David Burrell, CSC and Herbert McCabe, OP and continued by contemporary philosophers and theologians including Stephen Mulhall and Simon Hewitt—as an authentic extension of the Thomist tradition.

Though Thomas's relative influence has waxed and waned, his institutional influence remains profound. Thomas's brilliance alone does not account for his immense role in Catholic thought. Thomas's thought gave rise to institutional champions of Thomism beginning with his fledgling Dominican order, extending over the centuries through various universities, seminaries, religious orders and the wider Catholic life. To be a Thomist was to be associated not only with the person of Thomas Aquinas but with a long and multifaceted



Academic Editor: Alan Vincelette

Received: 30 May 2026

Revised: 4 July 2026

Accepted: 6 July 2026

Published: 13 July 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the author.

Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland.

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license.

set of communities. The Thomists of 16th-century Spain or 20th-century United States attempted to cope with a world very different from Thomas's 13th-century France. In light of these different circumstances, Thomists have four partly overlapping tasks: exegesis (establishing Thomas's historical positions), translation (presenting Thomas's substantial position in a different contextual framework), application (applying Thomas's thought to questions he had not considered), and friendly amendment (modifying aspects of his thought in order to save and vindicate his wider philosophy and theology).¹ This last task is, by far, the most controversial, and many Thomists argue that such amendment is, in the words of Thomas Joseph White, OP, a prominent, conservatively minded Thomist, "a sign of decline and capitulation, or mere stagnation" (T. J. White 2023, p. 132). Yet it is difficult to know at what point one capitulates—more conservative Thomists have produced a wide array of high-quality YouTube videos on Thomas. Minimally this is a work of translation and application, though in a medium so unlike Thomas's own, it is difficult to avoid at least some amendment. The alternative to engagement is the isolation of traditions. Serge-Thomas Bonino, OP argues that "Thomism is an analogical reality" that combines institutional and doctrinal criteria to adapt the tradition (Bonino 2010, p. 873). While White presupposes authentic Thomism resists adaptation, Bonino's defense of development cuts the other way. Ventimiglia describes most Aristotelian–Thomistic ontology and analytic ontology as largely "two parallel lines that never meet" (Ventimiglia 2012, p. 31). This may not be capitulation but rather isolation.

These four movements are the dynamics of a living tradition, not a form of degradation. The important questions are by what processes the movements are undertaken and to what ends. Grammatical Thomism assumes that friendly amendment is a form of respectful engagement and ongoing development of the Thomist tradition. Grammatical Thomism is a sub-category of Analytic Thomism.² It is distinguished by its stronger claim that Thomas's thought requires occasional reordering through a Wittgensteinian grammatical method.

The paper proceeds in four parts with a brief conclusion: The first traces the institutional transmission of Thomism, noting the four operations at work in various renewals. The second introduces Analytic Thomism, taking Peter Geach as an exemplar and Anthony Kenny as a boundary case. The third turns to Grammatical Thomism—its genealogy in Anscombe and Geach, its development in McCabe and Burrell. The fourth treats Grammatical Thomism as a living research program by examining the substantial/resolute divide among Grammatical Thomists.

2. Institutional Transmission

The pressures to adapt Thomas's thought and the institutional forces gathering around certain readings help constitute Thomism as a "living tradition". That tradition finds its doctrinal and institutional roots in the person of Thomas Aquinas.³ Thomas spent much of his intellectual life teaching members of his religious order and defending what was then the relative novelty of the Dominican form of religious life.⁴ His intellectual life was nurtured within the monastic (notably Monte Cassino) and University (Paris) educational systems. Thomas was explicit in theorizing on behalf of the Dominican mixture of contemplation and preaching, *contemplata aliis tradere* (Aquinas 2012, ST II-II q.188 a.6), which he argued is the best form of religious life.⁵ Thomas's thought was controversial in his lifetime, and shortly after his death, some of Thomas's positions were condemned by the bishop of Paris and Archbishop of Canterbury among other notables. In their General Chapter of 1279 in Paris, in the face of opposition to Thomas, the Dominican order forbade Dominicans to speak against Thomas and his writings; a subsequent Paris chapter in 1286 required Dominicans to promote and defend Thomas's doctrine (Mulchahey 1998; Boyle 2000). Thomas's thought was further affirmed by subsequent general chapters in Saragossa (1309),

Metz (1313), Bologna (1315), and Toulouse (1329). For example, the chapter at Metz in 1313 taught that Thomas's thought was "sounder and more universal than all others" (Quoted by [Kochaniewicz 2024](#), p. 564). Thus, Thomas's thought was considered not only correct but also the most appropriate for teaching the coming generations of Dominican friars and others over whom the Dominican preachers and teachers had influence. Thomas's wider institutional position was further secured by his canonization in 1323.

Thomas was a major medieval thinker but by no means the dominant thinker, as other religious orders maintained their own preferred intellectual traditions. Tommaso de Vio, OP (1469–1534), also known as Cardinal Cajetan, set the interpretive agenda for generations of Thomists. Cajetan developed a tripartite division of analogy (inequality, attribution, proportionality) in his *De Nominum Analogia* (1498). He argued that proportional analogy was the privileged mode of theological predication. Cajetan became the authoritative interpreter of Thomas under Pope Leo XIII and the object of criticism by both Analytic and Grammatical Thomists in the 20th century ([McInerney 1996](#); [Gilson 1961](#)).

During the "Second Scholasticism" of the 16th and 17th centuries centered around the University of Salamanca, Thomas rose to a level of prominence beyond his high medieval fame. The thought of Thomas was translated and adapted to address novel questions raised by the Protestant Reformation and in a newly globalizing world, which included issues of nascent international law and colonial governance. The scholars of Salamanca also integrated later medieval philosophy into their Thomist thought by way of friendly amendment. The recently founded Society of Jesus (Jesuits) took up the mantle of Thomas Aquinas according to a more flexible reading than that of their Dominican confreres. The Jesuits mandated Thomas's work across their network of schools in their *Ratio Studiorum* (1599), which remained in force, at least nominally, until the twentieth century.

Thomas was further institutionalized at the council of Trent (1545–1563). Thomas's *Summa Theologiae* (hereafter: *ST*) was rumored to have been placed on the altar next to the Bible and various papal documents ([Cessario 2005](#), pp. 74–78). The council established the seminaries to raise the educational standard of the clergy. Though Thomas was not included in all seminary curricula at this point, many of the better resourced seminaries and those developing out of universities with Thomist faculty developed a broadly Thomist method for the training of clergy.

Just as Thomas's thought was adapted to the globalization of the sixteenth century, Thomist thinkers adapted Thomas to the secularization and scientific development of the nineteenth. Haldane observed that late-nineteenth-century Thomists amended Thomas's thought to deploy it in opposition to the rationalism of the day and, in so doing, sought their own form of Cartesian certainty ([Haldane 2004](#), p. 69). The First Vatican Council (1870) declared that the existence of God is provable by means of the reason alone ([Vatican I 1870](#), chaps. 2, 4). In the wake of the council, Pope Leo XIII (1878–1903) praised the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas in the highest possible terms, writing to the bishops of the Church: "We exhort you, venerable brethren, in all earnestness to restore the golden wisdom of St. Thomas, and to spread it far and wide for the defense and beauty of the Catholic faith, for the good of society, and for the advantage of all the sciences" ([Leo XIII 1879](#), para. 31). Leo took a series of steps to institutionalize the thought of Thomas Aquinas as the touchstone philosopher and theologian, including establishing the Pontifical Academy of St. Thomas Aquinas (1879) and commissioning a critical edition of the works of Thomas Aquinas (beginning 1882). His successors as pope continued promoting Thomas. Pius X (1903–1914) ordered the adoption of Thomas in Catholic schools ([Pius X 1914](#)), and Benedict XV (1914–1922) mandated the teaching of Thomas in seminaries as a matter of canon law ([Peters 2001](#), 1366 §2). Pius XI reaffirmed these views of his predecessors and restated with even greater force the efficacy of Thomas's proofs for the existence of God ([Pius XI 1923](#)). As

part of this systematization and wide deployment, Thomas's thought was translated and amended into manuals better suited to scale and uniformity than Thomas's original texts.

In 1880, Thomas Aquinas was designated as Patron of all Catholic schools (Leo XIII 1880). The designation was particularly significant given the rapid expansion of Catholic schools in the late nineteenth century. Thomas's thought was adapted widely across all levels of this burgeoning system. After the First Vatican Council and the pontificate of Leo XIII, Thomas attained still greater institutional prominence across not only the seminary system but the wider Catholic education system.

In the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), Thomas's thought lost the preeminence of the previous decades but retained a considerable institutional influence. The Council decreed that seminarians should “penetrate [the mysteries of salvation] more deeply with the help of speculation, under the guidance of St. Thomas” while expanding the curriculum beyond the neo-Thomism of the previous century (Vatican II 1965, para. 16). John Henry Cardinal Newman's work on the development of doctrine (Newman [1878] 1989) and the so-called *Nouvelle Théologie* were two significant alternatives to Thomism vindicated at the council. While many of the intellectual forces shaping philosophy were present in the decades leading up to the Vatican II, the council provided an opening for a proliferation of philosophical and theological approaches to flourish among Catholic intellectuals.

Pope John Paul II's (1998) Encyclical *Fides et Ratio* is the most recent, major Church document on the role of philosophy and its relationship to theology in Catholic thought. Thomas was given pride of place, though for subtly different reasons than Leo XIII. John Paul commended, “not only because of what [Thomas] taught but also because of the dialogue which he undertook with the Arab and Jewish thought of his time” (John Paul II 1998, para. 43). Prior to becoming Pope John Paul II, Karol Wojtyła was a philosopher working in the phenomenological school of Thomism centered in Lublin, which, by way of translation and friendly amendment, combined the insights of phenomenology, principally through Edmund Husserl, with Thomas. Thus, John Paul was alive to bringing Thomas into productive dialog with other philosophical traditions. Unlike his late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century predecessors, John Paul was careful to commend the Thomist tradition as only one among many strands of Catholic philosophical thought (John Paul II 1998, para. 59). Nevertheless, he affirmed Thomism as an important living tradition within the intellectual life of the Catholic Church.

Turning to the present, though Thomas Aquinas is studied in a variety of secular institutions, his thought still finds a particular institutional home in Catholic institutions as a guide to curriculum. This influence is the clearest in seminaries and “ecclesiastical faculties”, institutions which grant church rather than civil degrees. In such institutions, the place of Thomas in the curriculum is stipulated in governing norms (*Code of Canon Law* 2012, can. 252; Francis 2017, art. 64; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2022). Pontifical Universities, universities created by the Holy See, i.e., the Pope, and granting ecclesiastical degrees have a substantial influence on Thomism. These include Roman universities such as the Gregorian and Angelicum but also universities with both ecclesial and civil charters such as Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina, the Pontifical University of Salamanca, and the Catholic University of America. Seminaries and pontifical universities represent only a tiny corner of Catholic higher education, though with an outsized influence on the wider orientation of Catholic higher education. Catholic higher education is internally diverse. The influence of Thomism varies, with some institutions self-consciously maintaining a Thomist orientation and others not. The history of Thomism is one of continual adaptation to new institutional circumstances. Analytic and later Gram-

matical Thomism arose as philosophers and theologians rooted in the Thomist tradition encountered a new and, for many, challenging form of philosophy in these settings.

3. Analytic Thomism

Analytic Thomism emerges in the wake of not only ecclesial developments, discussed above, but also philosophical developments, principally the rise in analytic philosophy. John Haldane coined the term “Analytic Thomism” which he described as seeking “to deploy the methods and ideas of twentieth-century philosophy—of the sort dominant within the English-speaking world—in connection with the broad framework of ideas introduced and developed by Aquinas” (Haldane 1997, p. 486). Haldane’s definition is expansive. Analytic Thomism is not committed to “any particular set of doctrines” nor is it “pious exegesis” of the saint. Analytic Thomism as defined by Haldane pre-dates him, though not as a self-conscious movement.

Even among analytic philosophers, what constitutes Analytic Philosophy is contested (Dummett 1994; Glock 2008; Hacker 1997; Soames 2014). Analytic Thomism adopts from Analytic Philosophy Gottlob Frege’s anti-psychologism and his concept/object distinction. Though Frege was German, Analytic Philosophy and Analytic Thomism become prominent primarily in Anglophone institutions.

3.1. The Translation Program

Thomas Aquinas himself championed Aristotle as a philosopher of the highest caliber, despite significant disagreements with Aristotle—including the possibility of friendship with God (*ST* II-II q.23 a.1) and whether God knows singulars (*ST* I q.14 a.11; q.22). Thomas often attributes these disagreements to Aristotle’s lack of access to Christian Revelation rather than to philosophical error as such. Analytic Thomists looked to the high philosophical standards of analytic philosophy in at least three ways. First, analytic philosophy provided a new, precise set of argumentative and conceptual tools as well as a greater focus on the role of language in philosophy. Second, analytic philosophy provided the opportunity to bring Thomas’s thought into dialog with wider philosophical conversations. Third and more strongly, it offered Thomists the opportunity to argue that Thomas’s thought helped to solve contemporary philosophical problems, even if Thomas himself did not face precisely the problem at issue. The work of translation provided an exegetical challenge to draw out precision in Thomas’s original texts, even in cases where Thomas lacked the technical apparatus that would later be developed.

The principal topics of this translation program have been philosophy of mind, where Analytic tools are used to update a broadly Aristotelian, Thomist hylomorphism against reductive, physicalist accounts (Haldane 1998; Kenny 2002; Pouivet 2006); philosophy of religion and natural theology (Stump 2003; Davies 2006); action theory and ethics (Anscombe 1958; Finnis 2011; MacIntyre 1988); and the metaphysics of *esse* and analogy (P. Geach 1969a; Klima 2002; Ventimiglia 2012).

One common result of this Analytic Thomist translation is to affirm a natural affinity between the pre-Cartesian Thomas and post-Cartesian analytic thinkers (Kerr 2004). Early analytic philosophers mostly followed Frege in his resistance to psychologizing tendencies in philosophy—the Cartesian turn to the self was a mistake to be corrected in Frege’s work and those influenced by Frege and by the anti-idealist development in Russell and Moore’s work, notably Wittgenstein.⁶

Fergus Kerr, OP observes that “Far from there being an unbridgeable gap between the philosophical assumptions of Thomism and analytic philosophy, then, the truth is that, under the heading of intentionality—that what our understanding grasps primarily and most readily is the specific nature of material things—one of Thomas’s most distinctive

assumptions has been central all along” (Kerr 2004, p. 127). After centuries, mainstream philosophy finally came back around to something close to Thomas’s understanding of intentionality.

3.2. Geach as a Paradigm

Peter Geach is a paradigmatic Analytic Thomist. Though personally and intellectually influenced by Wittgenstein, he was more directly influenced by Gottlob Frege. Geach’s more Fregean work is discussed in this section; his Wittgensteinian commitments are taken up below. Frege distinguishes between universals and individuals, concepts and objects (Ventimiglia 2020). For Frege, concepts are predicated of objects. “Mary” names an object, and “is a human being” is a concept that can be predicated of Mary, among many others. Frege argues that confusing concept and object is the source of great philosophical confusion—including confusion afflicting some Thomists. Geach sees in Frege a means to correct confusion around Thomas’s account of *esse*, especially around the name of God *ipsum esse subsistens*, which seems to predicate existence of God, as if existence were a property and God an object. On a Fregean reading, this is confused.

Geach is a Thomist with Fregean instincts. He wrote that “Frege, like Aquinas, held that there was a fundamental distinction *in rebus* answering to the logical distinction between subject and predicate the distinction between *Gegenstand* (object) and *Begriff* (concept)” (P. Geach 1955, p. 254). To save Thomas from apparent confusion, Geach distinguishes between three senses of “exists” and “does not exist.” Type A, the absence of reference: “Cerberus does not exist.” Type B, the absence of category referent: “There is no such thing as a Dragon.” And, type C, the discontinuity of a particular being. “Joseph is not.” Geach argues that Thomas’s claims about *esse* are of type C—claims about the continuity of an individual in being (P. Geach 1955, pp. 264–69; cf. Ventimiglia 2012). Geach uses Frege to defend Thomas’s first-order, individualized sense of *actus essendi* (P. Geach 1955).

Anthony Kenny agrees with the difficulty articulated by Geach but not Geach’s solution (Kenny 2002, pp. 41–50). Kenny concludes that on being, Thomas was “thoroughly confused” (Kenny 2002, v). The attempt to translate Thomas into Analytic terms discloses puzzles that Thomas himself did not confront. The translator of Thomas arriving at such a puzzle must either conclude that Thomas was simply wrong and part company with him, as Kenny does, or defend Thomas, as Geach does.

Haldane claims Geach was “trying to hold on with one hand to a Wittgensteinian [sic] view and with another to a Thomistic one” (Haldane 2016, p. 383). It was left to the next generation to synthesize Wittgenstein and Thomas more systematically through friendly amendment—naming and easing the tensions.

The Anglophone formation of Analytic Thomism was anticipated by developments in Poland. Four Polish Thomists—Bocheński, Salamucha, Drewnowski, and Sobociński—embraced formal logic rather than linguistic analytic methods. The Cracow Circle ended prematurely with the onset of the Second World War and the subsequent Communist period in Poland (Pouivet 2009). The Cracow project is worth remembering for its ambition to apply formal analytical methods to the thought of Thomas, though without the influence of Wittgenstein that came to shape Analytic Thomism at Oxbridge and from there more widely.

The translation project distinguishes Analytic Thomism from Grammatical Thomism. Analytic Thomists attempt to re-narrate Thomas’s understanding of *esse* in contemporary metaphysical terms; Grammatical Thomists, by contrast, see *esse* primarily as a feature of God-talk and secondarily metaphysical. The genealogy of this alternative method runs through the same Oxbridge Catholic milieu as Analytic Thomism, at least in part.

3.3. Kenny's "Critical Thomism" at the Edge of Friendly Amendment

Anthony Kenny is deeply steeped in the Catholic intellectual tradition, having studied under Bernard Lonergan, SJ at the Gregorian University in Rome. Kenny's first publication on Aquinas and Wittgenstein came from his doctoral dissertation at the Gregorian (Kenny 1959). He was ordained a priest but left both the priesthood and Catholicism behind after several years, but he never left Thomas Aquinas behind. Kenny and Herbert McCabe were longtime friends. Kenny names his own Thomist position as "critical as well as reverent" (Kenny 2008, p. 118). Kenny takes "critical Thomism" to be "free from any sectarian deformation" (Kenny 2008, p. 121). Kenny admires Thomas as a genius but distances himself from the ecclesial and scholarly project of a living Thomism. He does not find himself capable of endorsing all of Thomas's ethical views, though compares them favorably to utilitarianism. Similarly, Kenny defends Thomas's Five Ways from various critiques while ultimately concluding that they fail as proofs (Kenny 1969). Kenny takes his own reading of Thomas to be in the same spirit as Thomas's reading of Aristotle "stating [Aristotle's] views as clearly and sympathetically as possible, showing their connection with current concerns, and contesting them politely but firmly if they appear to be erroneous" (Kenny 2008, p. 119). Thomas offers friendly and unfriendly amendments to Aristotle. Sometimes Thomas simply contradicts Aristotle, on beatitude for example (*ST* I-II q.3 a.8; q.5 a.3).

Kenny is also an important Wittgenstein scholar, often finding sympathy between Thomas and Wittgenstein (Kenny 1959, 1984, 2006). Kenny, like Geach and Anscombe, concludes that Wittgenstein is right to critique the Cartesian ego. Instead, philosophers should be "more sympathetic to medieval preoccupations" about the soul and body (Kenny 1980, p. 28). So too, he sees in Wittgenstein and other linguistic philosophers a recovery of the study of human dispositions or habits long neglected by philosophers (Kenny 1980, p. 22).

He is less sympathetic to Thomas's metaphysics, which he describes as "a mixture of precious insight and damaging confusion" (Kenny 2008, p. 120). The confusion arises in large part from Thomas's understanding of *esse*. Kenny was formed in the tradition and knows it deeply (Kenny 1986). Unlike his friend McCabe and David Burrell, Kenny is content to note error in Thomas where he finds it rather than continuing the Thomist tradition. This is a different project though with some overlapping conclusions. As noted above, Kenny thinks that Thomas is wrong about being and spends a full monograph explaining how. Kenny admires Thomas—but he is not out to correct Thomas for the sake of Thomism.

4. Grammatical Thomism

The term "grammatical Thomism" originates from the movement's most prominent detractor, Francesca Murphy (Murphy 2007, p. 5). Probably contrary to her intention, her critique has helped unify a set of like-minded figures into something more closely resembling a school of Thomism. For Murphy, reading Thomas through Wittgenstein reduced Thomas's realist metaphysics to mere concern for language—talk about talk rather than talk about God and the world. Murphy accuses those reading Thomas through Wittgenstein, notably Burrell, McCabe, and Denys Turner, of escaping the hard work of doing metaphysics that characterizes proper Thomism through a retreat into the talk about talk that is Wittgenstein's philosophical grammar. Stephen Theron made a related, albeit briefer, objection a decade before Murphy, that analytic, and by extension grammatical, retellings of Thomas discard the central feature of Thomas's work: the analogy of being. According to Theron, Geach's Fregean retelling of *esse* is as bad as Wittgenstein's grammatical version of *esse* (Theron 1997, pp. 614–16). The force of these criticisms depends on the relationship of Wittgenstein's grammar to reality.

The intellectual genealogy of Analytic and Grammatical Thomism runs through a handful of Catholic, Oxbridge philosophers, who knew Wittgenstein both through his writings and in person. Anscombe and Geach met as Oxford undergraduates and married in 1941—though, unusually for the time, Anscombe kept her last name (Geach and Lewis 1991). Both, despite countervailing social pressures, were converts to Catholicism and began a longstanding association with the Dominicans of Blackfriars Hall, Oxford.

Both Geach and Anscombe combined their passions for philosophy and Catholicism. Anscombe first read Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* as an undergraduate and convinced her then fiancé Geach to do the same (Berkman 2025, p. 3). Geach admired Wittgenstein's thought, but Anscombe was its true champion. Though a graduate student at Oxford, Anscombe began attending Wittgenstein's weekend lectures in Cambridge on the foundations of mathematics in autumn of 1942 (Michaelmas term).⁷ Women were not eligible to receive Cambridge degrees at the time. Anscombe quickly became one of Wittgenstein's closest intellectual companions until his death in 1951. Wittgenstein also spent several extended periods living with Geach and Anscombe. Wittgenstein selected Anscombe to translate his *Philosophical Investigations* and to act as one of his literary executors.

Anscombe and Geach collaborated on several projects. In 1954 they translated *Descartes: Philosophical Writings* (Descartes 1954, p. 8). Their translation is marked by a concern to recover the pre-Cartesian distinction between sensory experience and intellectual operations that Descartes's "own Jesuit teachers at La Flèche" had maintained (Haldane 2016, p. 372). More pertinently, it is a distinction that Thomas and Wittgenstein also maintained. Anscombe and Geach also co-wrote *Three Philosophers* (Anscombe and Geach 1961). Anscombe wrote the chapter simply titled "Aristotle" and Geach the "Aquinas" and "Frege" chapters. The text is unusual insofar as there is no special effort to relate the three figures, though their presence in the same volume and Anscombe and Geach's wider commitments indicate they can be read together fruitfully.

Neither Anscombe nor Geach set out to produce philosophical systems—their writings focused on discrete problems which they drew on Wittgenstein and Thomas, among others, to solve: dualism, intentional action, the metaphysics of *esse*, the nature of the soul. They both held the position that their Catholicism did not require strict Thomism nor did their work as philosophers require strict Wittgensteinianism. For example, Geach diverged from Thomas on whether the human soul could exist separately from the body (P. Geach 1969b; Haldane 2016, p. 383).

Anscombe and Geach's daughter, Mary Geach, reflecting on her mother's philosophical engagement with Thomas, writes: "Anscombe drew upon [Thomas's] thought to an unknowable extent: she said to me that it aroused prejudice in people to tell them that a thought came from him: to my sister she said that to ascribe a thought to him made people boringly ignore the philosophical interest of it, whether they were for Aquinas or against him" (M. Geach 2011, xix). Anscombe's engagement with Thomas is far greater than her citations of Thomas might suggest.⁸ She sought to apply Thomas's thought to contemporary problems not, in the first instance, to reconstruct Thomas's historical positions.

Mary Geach argues that neither of her parents was interested in creating a new philosophical school: "The way in which she and my father combined analytic and Thomistic thought was not the way of people deciding to construct a combined philosophy of analytical Thomism, but the way of people who were in pursuit of truth and good philosophy, and took it where they found it" (M. Geach 2011, xix). That said, during Anscombe and Geach's time in Oxford, there were two principal options for Catholic intellectual life, the recently arrived Dominicans of Blackfriars and the somewhat more established Jesuits of St. Aloysius Parish and Campion Hall. Anscombe's initial conversion to Catholicism featured the stories of Jesuit martyrs and engagement with Jesuit academics, including the master of

Campion Hall, Martin D’Arcy, SJ. D’Arcy was a popular Catholic intellectual at the time. As noted previously, she and Geach eventually became affiliated with the Dominicans at Blackfriars, who were more focused on Catholic Social Teaching during that period.

4.1. Anscombe’s Contribution

Anscombe’s contributions run in a different direction from Geach’s. Compared to Anscombe, Geach engaged with Thomas far more frequently and directly. Anscombe engaged with Thomas more selectively than Geach. As Haldane notes: “[Anscombe] saw [Thomas] as a resource to be consulted, and where warranted to follow not as a *magister* but as the author of an insight or telling argument” (Haldane 2022, p. 462). She wrote “Modern Moral Philosophy” that helped relaunch a Thomist-friendly virtue ethics. Thomas is never cited—though Aristotle is (Anscombe 1958). Anscombe develops the Thomistic doctrine of double effect (*ST* II-II q.64) and practical knowledge in her *Intention* (Anscombe [1957] 2000; Schwenkler 2019).

While Geach translates Thomas into a Fregean idiom, Anscombe draws Thomas and Wittgenstein together to address particular philosophical problems. Her project is not to translate Wittgenstein into Thomas’s language nor Thomas into Wittgenstein’s but to provide the most compelling philosophical argument she can, which for Anscombe means drawing on both Thomas and Wittgenstein, often together, not always explicitly. Bringing Thomas and Wittgenstein into philosophical dialog, albeit in a more systematic and explicit form, becomes a signature move of Grammatical Thomism.

4.2. Inheritors

After Geach and Anscombe’s problem-focused approach, Wittgensteinian readings of Thomas became more systematic. At Blackfriars, Oxford, Herbert McCabe, OP develops a grammatical reading of Thomas. Independently, David Burrell, CSC, arguably the most systematic grammatical Thomist, comes to this reading by way of his studies at the Gregorian University under Bernard Lonergan, SJ, a noted Transcendental Thomist, though Lonergan disliked the label (Dunch 2024). Burrell’s major engagement with Wittgenstein arose through a Notre Dame faculty reading group in the 1960s (Burrell 2017, xxiii).

McCabe at Blackfriars and to a greater extent Burrell at Notre Dame adopt a more programmatic approach to reading Thomas with Wittgenstein than the discrete problem-focus readings of Anscombe and Geach surveyed above. Grammatical Thomists were not a self-conscious group. Their intellectual genealogy is varied. The borders of the movement are porous. What unites the project of Grammatical Thomism is a commitment to a grammatical reading of Thomas, particularly the *Prima Pars* of the *ST* and its discussion of the grammar of “God”. Victor Preller, an Episcopalian priest of an Anglo-Catholic disposition who taught at Princeton, independently develops a grammatical reading of Thomas (Preller 1967). Brian Davies, OP has edited and promoted much of McCabe’s work and is an influential Thomist of Wittgensteinian sympathies in his own right (Davies 2006). Davies’s own work tends to be more exegetical than McCabe’s (Davies and Nevitt 2019). Without Davies’s editorial work much of McCabe’s writing would be inaccessible; minimally Davies promoted Grammatical Thomism in this way.

Kerr’s influential *Theology after Wittgenstein* offers an extended case for theologians to productively engage with the later Wittgenstein (Kerr 1997). Kerr, though sometimes listed as a Grammatical Thomist himself, questions the utility of the label given the variety of influences on McCabe and other Grammatical authors (Kerr 2016). Kerr is certainly correct to trace influences other than Wittgenstein on McCabe’s apophaticism,⁹ which Kerr claimed had “nothing much to do with Wittgenstein” (Kerr 2016, p. 528). Apophatic restraint though characteristic of Grammatical Thomism is hardly exclusive to it. Victor

White, OP, one of McCabe's teachers at Blackfriars, was strongly apophatic, as was Josef Pieper, writing at about the same time, both uninfluenced by Wittgenstein.¹⁰ That said, Wittgenstein's grammar provides a method in service of that prior tradition. David Burrell, CSC credits Bernard Lonergan, SJ's method with shaping his own thinking (Dunch 2024). As Casati and Hewitt rightly argue, the primary utility of the label "Grammatical Thomism" is methodological rather than genealogical or doctrinal association (Casati and Hewitt 2024).

Grammatical Thomism shares with the wider Analytic Thomism an anti-Cartesian revival of Thomas. What is distinctive of Grammatical Thomism is placing language and forms of life prior to metaphysics in the opening questions of the *ST*. This is a clear and programmatic form of friendly amendment. McCabe puts the matter directly, those following Frege and Wittgenstein "start from the language end instead of, as Aquinas does, starting from the thought end" (McCabe 2008, p. 133). McCabe elsewhere expands: "*we* analyse understanding and thinking in terms of human communication whereas *Aquinas* analyses communication in terms of understanding and thinking" (McCabe 2008, p. 133). As Hewitt observes of McCabe, "The language by means of which I am able to function as a rational creature is received from others" (Hewitt 2021b, p. 824). Language is embedded in forms of life (Dunch Forthcoming).

Theological language games—the perfections of God, the Five Ways, divine simplicity—are not simple abstraction or free-standing logic. These claims are sustained by moral and spiritual ways of life. Burrell concludes: "knowing how to use a language, becomes a way of life" (Burrell 1972, p. 367). McCabe makes a similar point, "human beings are linguistic animals, and to say this is to say that they have intelligence" (McCabe 2012, p. 80). Any account of metaphysics must be grounded in the interactions of a human community—God and everything else is understood only in this social context.

Like many twentieth- and twenty-first century Thomists, Grammatical Thomists reject Cajetan's metaphysical systematization of analogy (McInerny 1996, pp. 1–29). Grammatical Thomists see in Thomas's use of the term analogy not a metaphysical theory in the first instance but a grammatical observation about how God-language works. McCabe put the point plainly, "Analogy is not a way of getting to know about God, nor is it a theory of the structure of the universe, it is a comment on our use of certain words" (McCabe 2006, p. 106).

4.3. Humans and Language Use

The Grammatical Thomism account of God-talk includes a corresponding account of human knowers, who engage in such talk. As noted above, Analytic Thomists argue for a substantial agreement between the pre-Cartesian Thomas and post-Cartesian analytic philosophy. As Kenny rightly observes, Wittgenstein recovers "medieval preoccupations" about soul and body (Kenny 1980, p. 28). Grammatical Thomists make a stronger claim—rationality is exercised in communication. In his provocative article "Virtue and Truth", McCabe argues that the Cartesian ego locates meanings in the wrong place. While I may have concepts in my own mind, the meaning of words is not the concept locked in my mind. The concept is the skill of using a word, which is open to public criteria of correctness (McCabe 2012, pp. 82–84). Human beings are fundamentally linguistic animals in community with other linguistic animals. Grammatical investigation, an investigation of the structures of communication, also, at least partially, discloses the structure of what human beings are engaging with, be it inanimate things, other creatures, or God.

From a Grammatical Thomist perspective, the division between theoretical and practical reason is porous. The concepts required for theoretical reasoning arise from the public structure of language, which itself arises within forms of life. The referents of words only make sense when located within a language game or form of life. As Wittgenstein famously

articulates in his “builders” thought experiment, pointing and uttering the word “slab”, that is to say ostension, does not itself establish a sense. The gesture of pointing is underdetermined. Pointing could designate a color, texture, area, etc. The reference makes sense only within the activity of construction (Wittgenstein 2009, paras. 1–10). The dispositions of good knowing are not separable from the moral and practical life. For Thomas the virtue of prudence is the hinge between practical reason and the will (*ST* II-II q.47). McCabe observes that for Thomas, *prudentia* is “an intellectual virtue which cannot [be exercised] without the moral virtues” (McCabe 2012, p. 94). He observes that practical reasoning “demands bodily sensitivity to the world around us” (McCabe 2012, p. 94). Learning to speak about God follows the same pattern as learning to speak about the world.

4.4. Defining Thesis

Grammatical Thomists read Thomas’s metaphysics, his claims about essence and existence, with the aid of Wittgenstein’s grammar. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes that “Grammar tells what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar)” (Wittgenstein 2009, para. 373; Mulhall 2015, pp. 2–3). For Wittgenstein, grammar is the means by which human beings make true or false statements about the world. Wittgenstein likens the rules of grammar to the rules of a game. The rules or grammar of soccer, for example, allow one to understand when a player scores a goal. But the rule, the grammar is not itself scoring the goal. Grammar merely allows for the identification of what constitutes a goal. Grammar is neither true nor false but apposite or inapposite for a given context. The rules of soccer have little use outside the context of playing or watching that game.

Murphy and Theron are right that Grammatical Thomism is concerned with language. Wittgenstein’s concern for language is a way of attending to reality, not ignoring reality. Grammar is in some sense arbitrary—the given lexical range of words varies by language. Of the indefinite number of possible grammars, human beings use only those grammars that are useful in their communal form of life. As Peter Hacker explains, for Wittgenstein, useful grammar captures both “very general regularities of nature” and “shared human responses” (Hacker 2021, pp. 190–91). Wittgenstein, and by extension Grammatical Thomists, engage reality through their attention to the way talk is used and structured.¹¹

David Burrell writes, “The fact that language obtains is reflected only in performance” (Burrell 2016, p. 56). This is true whether it is language about soccer, physics, or religion. The language performs a role in human life. Wittgenstein’s philosophy is centrally concerned with how language fits within human lives. Without the “friction” of human lives and human communities, language becomes meaningless abstraction. For language to engage reality it must engage it through human lives. For Grammatical Thomists, Wittgenstein provides tools unavailable to Thomas that allow for this engagement.¹²

4.5. Creation and the Grammar of God-Talk

Grammatical Thomism takes as a point of departure the creation and the immense strains that this places on language. If the world is created, then on one level, one is always speaking of creation when one speaks about the world. In most cases, such speech is bracketed to a narrow aspect of the world. The difficulty lies in speaking of the world as a whole or creation as created, i.e., with reference to God who is not created. McCabe agrees with the early Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* that “It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists” (Wittgenstein 2001, 6.44; McCabe 2010, p. 5). Wittgenstein’s insight informs the Grammatical Thomist reading of Thomas’s famous Five Ways, not as free-standing proofs for the existence of God but as an exploration of how to name the Creator, which Thomas makes more explicit in questions 12 and 13 on human knowledge of God and how to name God. For the Grammatical Thomist, the exploration of God-talk

is necessarily linked to an exploration of ourselves as linguistic animals in creation. Put in more practical terms, our virtues as creatures shape how we are able to speak about God. The most interesting dispute within Grammatical Thomism arises from disputes within Wittgenstein scholarship more broadly. What are we doing when we speak about the mystical or creation?

Grammatical Thomism finds in the beginning of the *Summa* a guide to theological language in stark contrast to late nineteenth-century Leonine Thomism. As noted above, in the late nineteenth century, Thomas's thought was pressed into service as a bulwark against rising atheism and agnosticism. In this context, the Five Ways were read as a free-standing philosophical proof for the existence of God.

Burrell and McCabe offer independent but substantially similar readings of the Five Ways, each holding that the Five Ways are not arguments to a being but an exposition of the logic of creation. Burrell sees in Thomas's framing of *ST I q.2* "the beginning and end of all things, and of rational creatures especially" and "the distinction" between creator and creation, the particular grammar of creatures speaking about God, that the rest of the *Prima Pars* tries to formulate (Burrell 1986, p. 35). McCabe puts the point this way: "to assert that God exists is to claim the right and need to carry on an activity, to be engaged in research" (McCabe 2010, p. 2). The question of God's existence is relocated from a detached proof to a way of being in a created world. For both, the Five Ways are an invitation to a kind of practice, an opening to a way of engaging in both dialog and life more broadly, rather than a closed and definite proof.

Creation is not a fact among other facts. So too, a statement about the Creator is unlike a statement about a being in the world. To recognize the world as created is to reorient one's understanding in a fundamental and fundamentally unstable way. Nothing in the world can give sufficient orientation to cope with creation. Burrell reads the beginning of the *Summa* as a personal as well as an intellectual challenge: "[Thomas's] proposal is rather like a call to a personal conversion, which one may more easily ignore" (Burrell 1986, p. 36). By moving away from certainty towards conversion, the amendments of Grammatical Thomism may at least in this respect move closer to Thomas's historical position than post-Leonine Thomism—this is a matter of exegetical debate.

5. A Living Research Program: What Grammatical Investigation Discloses

As noted at the outset, many critiques of Grammatical Thomism simply dismiss the project as antithetical to Thomism. Such sweeping criticism makes further debate less than fruitful. There are, however, interesting debates internal to Grammatical Thomism—the most important being what God-talk authorizes its users to say. This dispute within Grammatical Thomism parallels a wider dispute in the Wittgenstein scholarship between so-called substantial and resolute readers of the *Tractatus*. This debate not only concerns interpretation of the *Tractatus* but also the relationship between the various periods of Wittgenstein's philosophy. Since Grammatical Thomism draws on Wittgenstein, dispute in the Wittgenstein scholarship impacts Grammatical Thomism, just as disputes in Aristotle scholarship impact Thomism more generally. As the name implies, Grammatical Thomism draws on the grammar of the later Wittgenstein. Grammatical Thomists also appeal to the early Wittgenstein, however, as in McCabe's invocation of the "mystical" (McCabe 2010, p. 5). Substantial readers see a clear divide between Wittgenstein's early work in the *Tractatus* and later work in the *Investigations*. Resolute readers, by contrast, see continuity between the method of the *Tractatus* and the grammar of the *Investigations*. The relevant Wittgensteinian literature is long and complex (Bronzo 2012). To summarize the debate very briefly, the penultimate proposition of the *Tractatus* famously claims that the book itself, which concerns the status of language about the world as a whole, is nonsense. The

literature is divided as to what this might mean. One approach is to claim that the *Tractatus* and similar expressions are substantial nonsense—that they refer, or at least gesture, beyond the limits of language, somehow. Substantial readers take this to be a key claim of the *Tractatus* that Wittgenstein will reject in his later work. The major alternative view is that nonsense is simply nonsense. The propositions of the *Tractatus* are nonsense in the same way that “the smokestack swam deliciously” is nonsense: at least one of the words has no meaning in this context—or, in the idiom of the later Wittgenstein, the use of the term is outside the relevant grammar. It makes no claim on reality because it cannot be true nor false—in other words it makes no sense. Certain nonsense, like the propositions in the *Tractatus*, can, however, be rationally motivated. The propositions may not make sense, but there are reasons for using them. They have a therapeutic or edifying purpose. They may even help inform the way one lives.

Stephen Mulhall’s (2015) *The Great Riddle: Wittgenstein and Nonsense, Theology and Philosophy* revitalized interest in Grammatical Thomism. The main works of Burrell and McCabe do not weigh in on and largely predate the resolute/substantial debate. Following Cora Diamond and James Conant’s reading of Wittgenstein (though not Thomas), Mulhall develops a resolute reading of Grammatical Thomism (Mulhall 2015, pp. 24–26). According to Mulhall, Wittgenstein’s aim is not to identify ineffable truths but to “wean us away from the illusion that there are any ineffable truths” (Mulhall 2024, p. 229). In place of ineffable truths, Mulhall develops an account of riddles. A riddle is nonsensical until it is solved. Take the famous Sphinx’s riddle: what has four feet in the morning, two feet in the afternoon, and three at night? While it is nonsensical, one can make various educated guesses as to the solution—one can explore ways in which it makes sense. The riddle is a project of sense making. Once the riddle is solved, it ceases to be a riddle for the person who understands it and becomes just an oddly phrased statement.

Simon Hewitt rejects Mulhall’s resolute Grammatical Thomism as a proper form of such Thomism. Hewitt argues that McCabe’s use of Wittgenstein is precisely “to stop us talking nonsense” whereas Mulhall embraces nonsense (Hewitt 2021a; McCabe 2002, p. 216). Hewitt argues that the word “God”, insofar as it has a use for McCabe, has an assertoric force even if it does not have a reference since God is not within any category of being. In the same piece, McCabe goes on to claim that theology aims “to stop people making God in their own images, to stop us from mistaking our concepts and images and words for the mystery towards which they point” (McCabe 2002, p. 216). McCabe is worried about the misuse of God-language. From Mulhall’s perspective, one avoids such misuse precisely by acknowledging Great Riddles as unsolved.

While normal riddles are solvable given sufficient effort and experience, there seems to be no sufficient experience, at least in this world, for the language around Creation or the perfections of God to make sense. Mulhall calls such propositions Great Riddles. Like normal riddles, they invite investigation, but unlike normal riddles, that investigation is never exhausted. For example, Mulhall argues that Thomas’s Five Ways, as well as various scriptural phrases, refuse to make sense and that this is their great virtue (Mulhall 2015, pp. 42–60). The language of God is inexhaustible in the same way that the way to God through one’s form of life is inexhaustible and, at least in moral life, unfinished.

The substantial and resolute readings may be less distinct than Hewitt’s reading of Mulhall suggests. While the two readings divide on the substance of what God-talk discloses, both share the understanding of God-talk as practice-embedded and grammar-governed. Mulhall argues that the use of nonsense can be rationally motivated: language without literal sense can have a significant use “by virtue of [its] nonsensicality” (Mulhall 2024, p. 232). Indeed, one way of stopping someone speaking nonsense is coming to awareness of the limits of one’s speech. McCabe is not attempting to stop people from

using anthropomorphic language for God—even the Scriptures, after all, do so. The danger lies in a literal understanding of such language. To claim such language as both nonsensical and motivated is to defuse McCabe’s worry. The major difficulty of arbitrating this dispute is that useful nonsense and nonsense with assertoric force both seem to license similar uses of religious speech, which is purposeful yet cautiously deployed.

That said, the substantial/resolute divide is far from settled. Indeed, Grammatical Thomism benefits from ongoing engagement with the Wittgenstein literature. Various scholars—notably A.W. Moore, with his distinction between ineffable understanding and ineffable truths (Moore 2011, chap. 9), and Marie McGinn, with her elucidatory reading (McGinn 2006)—articulate positions between the two camps. As a living research program, Grammatical Thomism evolves alongside the Wittgenstein literature and related philosophical thought. The friendly amendments on Thomas are themselves open to further friendly amendment.

Grammatical Thomism holds that God-talk is sustained by forms of life. If this is true, then such talk must adapt to changing forms of life. Great Riddles, to use Mulhall’s language, may be fixed—through revelation, for example—or may arise through encounter with the world, the typical domain of natural theology. In either case the process of making sense of these riddles is ongoing. While the Creator does not change, creatures change constantly. Natural theology is and must be unfinished for a Grammatical Thomist. In many ways, Thomist natural theology has always been adaptive to new contexts, though not always explicitly so. As noted above, the world of Thomas Aquinas is not the world of the Second Scholasticism nor that of Leonine Thomism.

Grammatical Thomism, Forms of Life, and AI

The dawning shift in human forms of life seems to be living with advanced artificial intelligence. Already AI systems are treated as quasi-divine: powerful machines are described in theological terms and vice versa. Earlier Thomists responded to the upheavals of their own day, often at papal initiative or with papal support. In *Magnifica humanitas* Leo XIV addresses AI and its many consequences, continuing the social encyclical tradition initiated by Leo XIII (Leo XIV 2026). These developments, then as now, invite philosophical and theological response—one that Grammatical Thomism is well positioned to give.

The notion of forms of life, upon which Grammatical Thomism relies, is shaped partly through Wittgenstein’s engagement with computation. Alan Turing and Wittgenstein debated the foundations of mathematics and computation, particularly the ways in which computation is instantiated in human forms of life (Wittgenstein 1976). The mutual influence of Turing and Wittgenstein is itself debated in the literature (Shanker 1998; Floyd 2016; Proudfoot 2024). Insofar as the Grammatical Thomist looks to Wittgenstein for inspiration rather than doctrine, this plurality of opinion is a helpful expansion of resources. Recent Wittgenstein scholarship has taken up artificial intelligence in earnest (Ball et al. 2024). Grammatical Thomism has the potential to adopt this new scholarship into its existing framework to help answer increasingly pressing questions of how to understand God-talk in an age of talking and writing machines. To take just one promising line of inquiry, Wittgenstein’s grammar and philosophy of mathematics helps to distinguish the home contexts of language games in human forms of life from extensions of those games, which can bring distortion, which Wittgenstein feared, and useful novelty (Wittgenstein 2009, para. 116).¹³ AI that produces natural language is one such extension, capable of producing religious language without engaging in the form of life in which that language finds its home. A grammatical approach may help both identify the shifting rules of deracinated religious language and also appreciate the constructive potential as AI-produced language becomes part of human forms of life, including religious forms of life.

6. Conclusions

This article traced the emergence of Grammatical Thomism as a form of more extensive Wittgensteinian amendment within the wider movement of Analytic Thomism. The creative adaptation of Thomas is characteristic of Thomism across the centuries, especially in the renewals of Thomism during the Second Scholasticism, the Leonine revival, and the post-Vatican II diversification of Thomist and more widely Catholic thought. In all these cases, the operations of exegesis, translation, application, and, the more controversial, friendly amendment are present. It is by these four operations that a tradition continues to live.

Grammatical Thomism makes two significant contributions. First, through its reading of the opening of the *Summa*, most notably the Five Ways, the divine perfections and the grammar of God-talk, it explores how creaturely language about God functions, which becomes an interpretive key to read the rest of Thomas's work. In particular, the question of the existence of God is recast from a detached proof to an engaged grammar of creation, though resolute and substantial Grammatical Thomists differ on the particulars of this reframing. Second, it roots such God-talk in an understanding of human beings as linguistic animals. God-talk is rooted in communal experience and in ongoing virtuous practices. Put another way, Grammatical Thomists root their language about God in their linguistic practices; this rootedness makes such language concrete, discloses its inadequacy, and invites an ongoing project of investigation. God-language, and with it the religious—or, in a more Catholic idiom, sacramental—form of life, is not static but ongoing and evolving.

These contributions are continuous with prior developments of Thomism, sustained institutionally. Thomism is “an analogical reality” drawing together methods, doctrinal commitments, and institutional ties (Bonino 2010, p. 873). This is true for Blackfriars, Oxford or Notre Dame as much as it was for fourteenth-century Dominican chapters. The tradition stays alive in these confluences.

For the Catholic reader, this article offers a defense of adaptation that goes beyond exegesis, translation, and application to friendly amendment within Thomism and the particular Grammatical form of friendly amendment. For the non-Catholic reader it offers both a study of how a religious-philosophical tradition can be sustained and a model of how such a tradition dialogs with intellectual movements outside its own bounds. While from the outside, Catholicism may seem institutionally bound and static, in the case of Thomism at least, institutions provide the structures that allow for new dynamics with an old tradition. Thomism is a living tradition. A living tradition, as MacIntyre has argued, is not a set of fixed doctrines but a community of practice (MacIntyre 2007, chap. 15). The four operations described at the outset—exegesis, translation, application, and friendly amendment—are the means of sustaining this living tradition.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Acknowledgments: During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used Claude (Anthropic, Opus 4.7 and Opus 4.8) to obtain critical feedback on the argument, to identify potential objections, to verify sources and citations, to assist in translation, and for editing and drafting assistance. The author has written, edited, and reviewed the manuscript and takes full responsibility for the content of this publication. James Murphy, SJ offered helpful comments on a draft of this paper. I am grateful to the issue editor and to three anonymous peer reviewers for their insightful comments—their suggestions have significantly improved this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- ¹ My fourfold distinction has several antecedents. Haldane distinguishes between historical and problematic approaches to Thomas. Bonino highlights the “integrative power” of Thomism. De Haan offers a typology of Thomas’s, Thomasian, and Thomistic which are distinguished as doctrinal claims. My distinction is characterized by operations undertaken by Thomists (Haldane 1997; Bonino 2010; De Haan 2025).
- ² For an alternative taxonomy that distinguishes Wittgensteinian and Geach-Fregean strands as parallel see Damonte (2018).
- ³ For an overview of Thomas’s life and work see (Torrell 2023).
- ⁴ Bonino rightly argues that “if it is going to be faithful to the very nature of Thomism as a Scholastic form of thought, the effort for the renewal of Thomism cannot think of itself as an excavation that skips the layers of several centuries in order to revive the cadavers that lie underneath. One must therefore take into consideration the Thomist tradition posterior to Thomas.” (Bonino 2010, p. 870).
- ⁵ Citations to Thomas Aquinas both in Latin and English are taken from <https://aquinas.cc> unless otherwise noted. The convention for citing Thomas’s *Summa Theologiae* (ST) is to reference it by part, question, and article.
- ⁶ “Many [analytic Thomists] have been heavily influenced by Wittgenstein, who like Aquinas stands at the opposite pole of philosophy from the Cartesian tradition which sees epistemology as the basic philosophical discipline and private consciousness as the fundamental datum of epistemology.” (Kenny 2007, p. 24).
- ⁷ For an overview of Wittgenstein’s life and work see (Monk 1991). For a narrower treatment of Wittgenstein’s relationship to Anscombe and to a lesser extent Geach see (Berkman and Teichmann 2025).
- ⁸ Haldane provides a comprehensive list of Anscombe’s explicit references to Thomas (Haldane 2022, pp. 464–68).
- ⁹ McCabe is reported to have disclaimed the label “Thomist” altogether (Casati and Hewitt 2024, p. 3), though this may be due to its associations with the manualist tradition. McCabe was an unabashed disciple of Thomas Aquinas.
- ¹⁰ Kerr attributes McCabe’s apophaticism primarily to Victor White’s influence (Kerr 2016; V. White 1956; Pieper 1999). Apophatic or negative theology investigates what God is not, whereas cataphatic or positive theology investigates what God is.
- ¹¹ For a Catholic metaphysical argument defending Wittgenstein’s compatibility with realist metaphysics, see (Goodill 2022, chap. 1).
- ¹² “I think it is possible to give a better account of this than does Aquinas.” (McCabe 2008, p. 132).
- ¹³ There are also promising, more technical lines of inquiry—for example, in the relationship between mathematical/computational infinite and the infinity of God. Georg Cantor’s diagonal argument is used by Alan Turing to mark the limits of computation in the paper in which he proposes what is now commonly referred to as the “Turing Machine” (Turing 1937). Cantor’s transfinite theory provoked a neo-Scholastic reaction as potentially pantheist insofar as it postulates infinite entities other than God. Cantor rejected this implication in his 1885–1886 correspondence with Cardinal Johann Baptist Franzelin, SJ (1816–1886), a prominent theologian at the First Vatican Council and official in the Roman Curia under Leo XIII, who was discussed above. Cantor drew a distinction between God’s non-quantitative, absolute infinity and the quantitative infinities in the created world and in mathematics (Cantor 1991, chap. 5; Newstead 2009; Dauben 1977). Wittgenstein controversially resists Cantor’s infinite sets (see Marion 1998), which may open various ways to consider the theoretical infinities built into computer science, the continued limits of computation, and the infinity of God.

References

- Anscombe, Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret. 1958. Modern Moral Philosophy. *Philosophy* 33: 1–19. [CrossRef]
- Anscombe, Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret. 2000. *Intention*, 2nd ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. First published 1957.
- Anscombe, Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret, and Peter Geach. 1961. *Three Philosophers*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Aquinas, Thomas. 2012. *Summa Theologiae*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Edited and corrected by the Aquinas Institute. Rochester: Aquinas Institute. Available online: <https://aquinas.cc> (accessed on 3 July 2026).
- Ball, Brian, Alice C. Helliwell, and Alessandro Rossi, eds. 2024. *Wittgenstein and Artificial Intelligence, Volume I: Mind and Language*. London: Anthem Press.
- Berkman, John. 2025. Anscombe’s Relationship with Wittgenstein. In *Anscombe on Wittgenstein: Reminiscences of a Philosophical Friendship*. Edited by John Berkman and Roger Teichmann. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Berkman, John, and Roger Teichmann, eds. 2025. *Anscombe on Wittgenstein: Reminiscences of a Philosophical Friendship*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bonino, Serge-Thomas. 2010. The Thomist Tradition. *Nova et Vetera* 8: 869–81.
- Boyle, Leonard E. 2000. The Setting of the *Summa Theologiae* of Saint Thomas (The Etienne Gilson Series 5). Toronto, 1982. In *Facing History: A Different Thomas Aquinas*. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers.
- Bronzo, Silver. 2012. The Resolute Reading and Its Critics. An Introduction to the Literature. *Wittgenstein-Studien* 3: 45–80. [CrossRef]

- Burrell, David B. 1972. Method and Sensibility: Novak's Debt to Lonergan. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* XL: 349–67. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Burrell, David B. 1986. *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Burrell, David B. 2016. *Aquinas: God and Action*, 3rd ed. Edited by Mary Budde Ragan. Eugene: Wipf and Stock.
- Burrell, David B. 2017. Preface. In *Stations on the Journey of Inquiry: Formative Writings of David B. Burrell, 1962–72*. Edited by Mary Budde Ragan. Eugene: Wipf and Stock.
- Cantor, Georg. 1991. *Briefe*. Edited by Herbert Meschkowski and Winfried Nilson. Berlin and Heidelberg: Springer.
- Casati, Filippo, and Simon Hewitt. 2024. Grammatical Thomism—An Introduction. *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 85: 1–7. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Cessario, Romanus. 2005. *A Short History of Thomism*. Washington: The Catholic University of America Press.
- Code of Canon Law. 2012. Washington: Canon Law Society of America.
- Damonte, Marco. 2018. An Historiographic Label, Its Evidence, Its Misunderstanding and Its Future: Wittgensteinian Thomism. *Lexicon Philosophicum: International Journal for the History of Texts and Ideas* 6: 199–213.
- Dauben, Joseph W. 1977. Georg Cantor and Pope Leo XIII: Mathematics, Theology, and the Infinite. *Journal of the History of Ideas* 38: 85–108. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Davies, Brian. 2006. Aquinas on What God Is Not. In *Aquinas's Summa Theologiae: Critical Essays*. Edited by Brian Davies. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Davies, Brian, and Turner Nevitt, eds. 2019. *Thomas Aquinas's Quodlibetal Questions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- De Haan, Daniel D. 2025. The Sapiential Task of the Thomist Tradition: To Enlarge and Perfect the Old by Way of the New. *New Blackfriars* 106: 474–91. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Descartes, René. 1954. *Descartes: Philosophical Writings*. Edited and Translated by Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe, and Peter Geach. Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons.
- Dummett, Michael A. E. 1994. *Origins of Analytical Philosophy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Dunch, Matthew. 2024. Reading Aquinas with David Burrell, CSC: How Lonergan's Exegesis and Method Open a Way to Grammatical Thomism. *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 85: 95–110. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Dunch, Matthew. Forthcoming. *Aquinas, Wittgenstein, and the Riddle of Spiritual Pedagogy*. Washington: The Catholic University of America Press.
- Finnis, John. 2011. *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Floyd, Juliet. 2016. Chains of Life: Turing, *Lebensform*, and the Emergence of Wittgenstein's Later Style. *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* 5: 7–89. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Francis. 2017. *Veritatis Gaudium on Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties*. Vatican: The Holy See.
- Geach, Mary. 2011. Introduction. In *From Plato to Wittgenstein: Essays by G. E. M. Anscombe*. Exeter: Imprint Academic.
- Geach, Peter. 1955. Form and Existence. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 55: 251–72. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Geach, Peter. 1969a. *God and the Soul*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Geach, Peter. 1969b. What Do We Think With. In *God and the Soul*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Geach, Peter, and Harry A. Lewis. 1991. *Peter Geach: Philosophical Encounters*. Alphen aan den Rijn: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Gilson, Étienne. 1961. *Being and Some Philosophers*, 2nd ed. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies.
- Glock, Hans-Johann. 2008. *What Is Analytic Philosophy?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Goodill, David. 2022. *Nature as Guide: Wittgenstein and the Renewal of Moral Theology*. Washington: The Catholic University of America Press.
- Hacker, Peter Michael Stephan. 1997. *Wittgenstein's Place in Twentieth-Century Analytic Philosophy*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hacker, Peter Michael Stephan. 2021. *Insight and Illusion: Themes in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, 3rd ed. London: Anthem Press. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Haldane, John. 1997. Analytical Thomism: A Prefatory Note. *The Monist* 80: 485–86. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Haldane, John. 1998. Return to Form in the Philosophy of Mind. *Ratio* 11: 253–77. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Haldane, John. 2004. *Faithful Reason: Essays Catholic and Philosophical*. London: Routledge.
- Haldane, John. 2016. Anscombe and Geach on Mind and Soul. *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 90: 369–94. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Haldane, John. 2022. Anscombe and Aquinas. In *The Oxford Handbook of Elizabeth Anscombe*. Edited by Roger Teichmann. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Hewitt, Simon. 2021a. Grammatical Thomism. *Religious Studies* 57: 30–48. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Hewitt, Simon. 2021b. Herbert McCabe on God and Humanity. *New Blackfriars* 102: 815–33. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- John Paul II. 1998. *Fides et Ratio*. Vatican: The Holy See.
- Kenny, Anthony. 1959. Aquinas and Wittgenstein. *The Downside Review* 77: 217–35. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Kenny, Anthony. 1969. *The Five Ways: St Thomas Aquinas' Proofs of God's Existence*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Kenny, Anthony. 1980. *Aquinas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Kenny, Anthony. 1984. *The Legacy of Wittgenstein*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Kenny, Anthony. 1986. *A Path from Rome: An Autobiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kenny, Anthony. 2002. *Aquinas on Being*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Kenny, Anthony. 2006. *Wittgenstein*, Rev. ed. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Kenny, Anthony. 2007. Aquinas Medalist's Address. *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 80: 23–27.
- Kenny, Anthony. 2008. Thomas and Thomism. In *From Empedocles to Wittgenstein: Historical Essays in Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kerr, Fergus. 1997. *Theology after Wittgenstein*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Kerr, Fergus. 2004. Aquinas and Analytic Philosophy: Natural Allies? *Modern Theology* 20: 123–39. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Kerr, Fergus. 2016. Comment: Grammatical Thomism? *New Blackfriars* 97: 527–28. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Klima, Gyula. 2002. Aquinas's Theory of the Copula and the Analogy of Being. *History of Philosophy & Logical Analysis* 5: 159–76. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Kochaniewicz, Bogusław. 2024. The Stance of the Dominicans Towards the Immaculate Conception of Mary on the Example of Selected Scripts (13th–16th Centuries). *Scripta Theologica* 56: 561–96. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Leo XIII. 1879. *Aeterni Patris*. Vatican: The Holy See.
- Leo XIII. 1880. *Cum Hoc Sit*. Vatican: The Holy See.
- Leo XIV. 2026. *Magnifica humanitas*. Vatican: The Holy See.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair C. 1988. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair C. 2007. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Marion, Mathieu. 1998. *Wittgenstein, Finitism, and the Foundations of Mathematics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- McCabe, Herbert. 2002. Praying as We Ought. In *God Still Matters*. Edited by Brian Davies. London: Continuum.
- McCabe, Herbert, ed. 2006. Analogy. In *Thomas Aquinas, Knowing and Naming God (1a. 12–13)*. *Summa Theologiae* 3. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McCabe, Herbert. 2008. *On Aquinas*. Edited by Brian Davies. New York: Continuum.
- McCabe, Herbert. 2010. Creation. In *God Matters*. London: Continuum.
- McCabe, Herbert. 2012. *The Good Life: Ethics and the Pursuit of Happiness*. London: Bloomsbury. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- McCool, Gerald A. 1990. Is Thomas' Way of Philosophising Still Viable Today? *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 64: 1–13. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- McGinn, Marie. 2006. *Elucidating the 'Tractatus': Wittgenstein's Early Philosophy of Logic and Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McInerney, Ralph. 1996. *Aquinas and Analogy*. Washington: The Catholic University of America Press.
- Monk, Ray. 1991. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*. New York: Penguin.
- Moore, A. W. 2011. *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mulchahey, M. Michèle. 1998. *First the Bow Is Bent in Study...: Dominican Education Before 1350*. *Studies and Texts* 132. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies.
- Mulhall, Stephen. 2015. *The Great Riddle: Wittgenstein and Nonsense, Theology and Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mulhall, Stephen. 2024. Ineffability, or the Uses of Nonsense According to Wittgenstein. In *Religionsphilosophie nach Wittgenstein: Sprachen und Gewissheiten des Glaubens*. Edited by Esther Heinrich-Ramharter. Berlin: J. B. Metzler. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Murphy, Francesca Aran. 2007. *God Is Not a Story: Realism Revisited*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Newman, John Henry. 1989. *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 6th ed. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press. First published 1878.
- Newstead, Anne. 2009. Cantor on Infinity in Nature, Number, and the Divine Mind. *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 83: 533–553. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Peters, Edward N., ed. 2001. *The 1917 or Pio-Benedictine Code of Canon Law: In English Translation with Extensive Scholarly Apparatus*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press.
- Pieper, Josef. 1999. *The Silence of St. Thomas: Three Essays*. South Bend: St. Augustine's Press.
- Pius X. 1914. *Doctoris Angelici*. Vatican: The Holy See.
- Pius XI. 1923. *Studiorum Ducem*. Vatican: The Holy See.
- Pouivet, Roger. 2006. *After Wittgenstein, St. Thomas*. Translated by Michael S. Sherwin. South Bend: St. Augustine's Press.
- Pouivet, Roger. 2009. Jan Salamucha's Analytical Thomism. In *The Golden Age of Polish Philosophy: Kazimierz Twardowski's Philosophical Legacy*. Edited by Sandra Lapointe, Jan Woleński, Mathieu Marion and Wioletta Miskiewicz. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Preller, Victor. 1967. *Divine Science and the Science of God: A Reformulation of Thomas Aquinas*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Proudfoot, Diane. 2024. Wittgenstein and Turing on AI: Myth versus Reality. In *Wittgenstein and Artificial Intelligence, Volume I: Mind and Language*. Edited by Brian Ball, Alice C. Helliwell and Alessandro Rossi. London: Anthem Press.
- Schwenkler, John. 2019. *Anscombe's Intention: A Guide*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Shanker, Stuart G. 1998. *Wittgenstein's Remarks on the Foundations of AI*. London: Routledge. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Soames, Scott. 2014. *The Analytic Tradition in Philosophy, Volume 1: The Founding Giants*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Stump, Eleonore. 2003. *Aquinas*. London: Routledge.
- Theron, Stephen. 1997. The Resistance of Thomism to Analytical and Other Patronage. *The Monist* 80: 611–18. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Torrell, Jean-Pierre. 2023. *Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Person and His Work*, 3rd ed. Translated by Robert Royal, and Matthew K. Miner. Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, vol. 1.
- Turing, Alan. 1937. On Computable Numbers, with an Application to the *Entscheidungsproblem*. *Proceedings of the London Mathematical Society* 42: 230–65. [[CrossRef](#)]
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. 2022. *Program of Priestly Formation*, 6th ed. Washington: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.
- Vatican I. 1870. *Dei Filius*. Vatican: The Holy See.
- Vatican II. 1965. *Optatam Totius*. Vatican: The Holy See.
- Ventimiglia, Giovanni. 2012. *To be o esse? La questione dell'essere nel tomismo analitico*. Rome: Carocci.
- Ventimiglia, Giovanni. 2020. Essence. In *Aquinas after Frege*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. [[CrossRef](#)]
- White, Thomas Joseph. 2023. Thomism after Vatican II. In *Principles of Catholic Theology, Book 1*. Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, vol. 23.
- White, Victor. 1956. *God the Unknown and Other Essays*. London: Harvill Press.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1976. *Wittgenstein's Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics, Cambridge, 1939*. Edited by Cora Diamond. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 2001. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Translated by David Pears, and Brian McGuinness. London: Routledge.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 2009. *Philosophical Investigations*, 4th ed. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.