Étienne Gilson was the greatest Thomist philosopher of the 20th century. The Frenchman's thought falls into three parts. Having been trained at the Sorbonne by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Gilson was first a historian of medieval Christian thought. Gilson showed the diversity of ideas as between, for instance, Augustine, Bonaventure, Albert the Great, Aquinas, and Duns Scotus. His classic historical studies include *Bonaventure* (1924), *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy* (1932), and *Jean Duns Scot* (1952). The immediate result of Leo XIII's promotion of Thomas Aquinas in *Aeterni Patris* (1879), reinforced by the “modernist crisis” in Catholic theology (1903-1915), was the use of “Thomism” in seminary education as a timeless source of philosophical truths. The “medievals” were viewed as a single block, opposed to the “moderns.” Gilson, however, taught his contemporaries to see the medievals as individuals. He established the *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen age* and the Institute of Medieval Studies, in Toronto, to further the text-based study of medieval philosophies and theology. The second way in which Gilson renewed modern Thomism was to show that the author of the *Summa theologiae* was a theologian, who used revealed truths as a springboard into philosophical arguments. From his 1919 *Le Thomisme* onwards, and most influentially in *The Christian Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas* (1961), Gilson demonstrated that Thomas' writings bind faith and reason together by being structurally theological and argumentatively philosophical. The lay Catholic historian replaced the idea of Thomas Aquinas as a cleric's philosopher with an image of the Dominican saint as a theologian whose reasoning is all the more cogent for being grounded in faith. Third, in addition to being an historian, Gilson was a Thomist philosopher in his own right. In public debates in the late 1920s and early 1930s, Gilson defended the possibility of Christian philosophy by arguing that a philosophy influenced by Christian revelation is more likely to be realist than a philosophy separated from revelation. In *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (1938), *Thomist Realism* ([1939] 1986), and *L'être et l'essence* (1948), Gilson argued that a philosophy based in Christian revelation is anchored in things as they really exist, whereas Christian and secular thinkers who have philosophized independently of theology have exaggerated the conceptual element of knowledge at the expense of the existential reality of the known object. As a philosopher, Gilson became known as an “existential Thomist.” Several of his philosophical texts develop complementary themes, such as his works in aesthetics, like *Painting and Reality* (1955), his anti-Wittgensteinian *Linguistics and Philosophy* ([1969] 1988), and his critique of neo-Darwinism, *From Aristotle to Darwin and Back* ([1971] 1984). A Parisian by birth, Gilson's “electric pen” enabled him to be widely read outside the guild of “Thomist scholarship.” Gilson's thought is commended in the encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (1998) as a model of the right relation of faith and reason.

SEE ALSO: Faith and Reason; Lossky, Vladimir N. (1903-1958); Philosophy, Christian

References and Suggested Readings


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