Vetera novis augere: Neo-Scholastic philosophers and their concepts of tradition

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I Introduction

Neo-Scholastic philosophy has frequently been interpreted as a system of thought so thoroughly committed to timeless truth that it was incapable of viewing historical change other than in negative terms. Gerald McCool, for instance, argued as recently as 2003 that Neo-Scholasticism aspired to be a "changeless unified system" and therefore looked with great suspicion at historicizing treatments of the medieval past, with their explicit or implicit challenge of the presumed coherence of medieval scholastic philosophy.[1] According to McCool, the history of Neo-Scholasticism between Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879) and the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) can even be written as a story of increasingly desperate struggles with the relativizing effects of contextual historical inquiry. Although conservative Neo-Scholastics did what they could to defend their "system" against historians like Etienne Gilson, Henri de Lubac, and Henri Bouillard, all of whom drew attention to a variety in medieval positions grossly ignored by the Neo-Scholastic synthesis, "history" eventually tore the philosophical "system" from its pedestal.[2]

McCool's binary oppositions between "system" and "history" or "unity" and "pluralism" allow for dramatic storylines – narrative history in a tragic key, as Hayden White would put it[3] – but also run a risk of oversimplification. Were late nineteenth-century Neo-Scholastics really as afraid of "history" in the sense of change and context-dependency of philosophical positions as McCool assumes? Were they really committed to a "timelessness" incompatible with development over time? How convincing is, in other words, McCool's master narrative ("from unhistorical thinking to historical sensitivity") in the light of how late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Neo-Scholastic philosophers

1 McCool, Gerald A., *The Neo-Thomists*, Milwaukee 2003, 155.

2 Ibid., 148–149. See also McCool, Gerald A., *From Unity to Pluralism: The Internal Evolution of Thomism*, New York 1989, 208.

3 White, Hayden, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore 1973, 9–10.

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themselves conceived of their work in relation to that of their medieval predecessors?

Surprisingly, perhaps, quite a few Neo-Scholastic philosophers in the decades around 1900 explicitly denied that historical change was a threat to the project inaugurated with *Aeterni Patris*. For example, at the Higher Institute of Philosophy in Leuven, founded in 1889 with help from Leo XIII himself, Désiré Mercier and Maurice De Wulf expressly rejected the idea of "enslaving our philosophical thought to that of St. Thomas."[4] Scholasticism, for them, was not "a sort of mummy buried in a tomb around which we would only have to keep guard," but a "young and active organism."[5] This led De Wulf in particular to dissociate himself from "extreme partisans of tradition, for whom all change seems to imply betrayal of truth or else doctrinal decay."[6] Early twentieth-century commentators on the Leuven school, such as Peter Coffey in Ireland and Clément Besse in France, likewise denounced "defenders of tradition" that had become its "prisoners" by securing scholastic philosophy in a "cavern."[7]

Early twentieth-century Neo-Scholastics at Leuven even employed a rhetoric not unlike the rhetoric of *aggiornamento* in the 1960s Catholic Church. They liked to emphasize the "neo" in Neo-Scholasticism in order to stress that scholasticism "has had both its matter and form dressed up and refurbished, to suit the changed and changing mentality of the age we live in."[8] Not unlike Neo-Calvinists in the Netherlands, led by Abraham Kuyper, they saw themselves as engaged in "a process of overhauling and resetting" that would transform their centuries-old heritage into "an attractive modern article."[9] Precisely for this reason, they were also criticized for adhering too loosely to the "Angelic Doctor." Especially in Italy, where more conservative Neo-Scholastics such as Francesco Olgiati ex-

4 Mercier, Désiré, "Neo-Scholastic Philosophy" (1894), in: David A. Boileau (ed.), *Cardinal Mercier: A Memoir*, Leuven 1996, 361–367, 366. For the reader's convenience, I quote English translations instead of French or Dutch originals whenever possible. In all other cases, translations are mine.

5 Mercier, Désiré, "The Philosophical Assessment of the Nineteenth Century" (1900), Ibid, 323–343, 339.

6 De Wulf, Maurice, *Scholasticism Old and New: An Introduction to Scholastic Philosophy, Medieval and Modern*, transl. P. Coffey, Dublin et al. 1907, 158.

7 Coffey, P., "Philosophy and the Sciences at Louvain," in: *The Irish Ecclesiastical Record* 17 (1905): 385–408, 485–516, at 400, quoting Besse, C., *Deux centres du mouvement thomiste: Rome et Louvain*, Paris 1902, 34.

8 De Wulf, *Scholasticism Old and New*, 157.

9 Ibid., 259. For analysis, see Paul, Herman, "Who Suffered from the Crisis of Historicism? A Dutch Example," in: *History and Theory* 49 (2010): 169–193.

ercised considerable influence,[10] the "open" Neo-Scholasticism advocated at Leuven was almost routinely associated with "relativism," especially in the era of the modernist crisis, when everything resembling "doctrinal development" had a smell of heresy.[11] In a sense, therefore, the Leuven Neo-Scholastics had to steer a difficult middle course between "traditionalist" identification with the past on the one hand and progressivist "disloyalty" to the scholastic legacy on the other.

Simple dichotomies between "system" and "history" will therefore be of little help in understanding how Neo-Scholastic philosophers negotiated their "past-present relations."[12] It will be more profitable to examine what "history" actually meant to the Neo-Scholastics and how these meanings changed over time. The question, in other words, is not *whether* Neo-Scholastic philosophy as taught by Mercier, De Wulf, and their successors had any space for history, but *what kind of* history was implied in their philosophical teaching. Interestingly, this is a question that the Leuven Neo-Scholastics themselves would have had no trouble recognizing. Although "historicity" and "philosophy of history" – McCool's favorite terms – entered their vocabulary only after World War II, "tradition" was a term of reference through which they articulated, from the 1880s up until the 1950s, their (changing) positions vis-à-vis medieval scholastic philosophy. Accordingly, for understanding the relations that Neo-Scholastics at Leuven maintained with the scholastic past, their explanations of what it meant to them to work in a scholastic or Thomist tradition offers a promising point of departure.

By focusing on four of Leuven's most influential faculty members – Mercier, De Wulf, Louis De Raeymaeker, and Fernand Van Steenberghen – this chapter advances the thesis that Leuven Neo-Scholastics between 1880 and 1960 resembled each other in emphasizing similar or nearly similar features of tradition. They all conceived of tradition in terms of progressive development and therefore dissociated themselves from both "traditionalism" and "untraditional" attempts at thinking from anew. They all saw themselves, in Bernard of Chartres' celebrated phrase, as "dwarfs on the shoulders of giants." Also, from De Wulf onwards,

10 Cenacchi, Giuseppe, "Agostino Gemelli (1878 – 1959) und Francesco Olgiati (1886 – 1962)," in: Emerich Coreth/Walter M. Neidl/Georg Pfligersdorffer (ed.), *Christliche Philosophie im katholischen Denken des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*, vol. 2, Graz et al. 1988, 702 – 711.

11 La Piana, George, "Recent Tendencies in Roman Catholic Theology," in: *The Harvard Theological Review* 15 (1922): 233 – 292, 250 – 256.

12 I discuss this concept in Paul, Herman, "Relations to the Past: A Research Agenda for Historical Theorists," in: *Rethinking History* 19 (2015): 450 – 458. My analysis is also indebted to Phillips, Mark Salber, *On Historical Distance*, New Haven 2013.

they saw themselves as belonging to a Leuven tradition inaugurated by Mercier, to which they felt loyal in spite of (growing) divergence from Mercier's own philosophical views. If this implies that none of the four philosophers had any trouble recognizing *temporal distance* between the thirteenth and the twentieth centuries, they nonetheless disagreed on the nature as well as the degree of *philosophical continuity* between Thomas and themselves. When, from the 1930s onwards, De Raeymaecker and Van Steenberghen presented this continuity as one of philosophical attitudes more than of metaphysical commitments, their frequent appeals to Mercier could not conceal that, in fact, they exchanged a scholastic notion of philosophy as a collective enterprise over time for one that privileged individual experience and personal virtue.

II "The School of Aristotle and St. Thomas"

If architecture is a language, then the Higher Institute of Philosophy is a text in Medieval Latin script. If anything, its neo-Gothic design seems to convey nostalgia for a time when the Catholic Church still reigned supreme, clergy and laity alike still revered the Almighty, and society had not yet been afflicted with the ills of secularization and individualization. It has been said that the building "gave the philosophical world at Leuven an atmosphere wherein students could easily be inducted into speculative contemplation, in spite of themselves."[13] And just in case neo-Gothic pinnacles and arch windows did not suffice, the message was explicated, or so it seems, in the institute's main hall, the walls of which were decorated with quotations from the Bible, Thomas Aquinas, and *Aeterni Patris*.

At closer inspection, though, stone and paint turned out to convey more complicated messages. This is especially true for the main banderole, right above the podium, which contained a line from *Aeterni Patris: Edicimus libenti gratoque animo excipiendum esse quidquid utiliter fuerit a quopiam inventum atque excogitatum*. That is: "[W]e hold that every word of wisdom, every useful thing by whomsoever discovered or planned, ought to be received with a willing and grateful mind."[14] Notably, this was not only an atypical quotation from an encyclical that above all other things recommended a return to medieval scholasticism, but also a notorious sentence. Writing in the *Journal des débats*, the French journalist Gabriel Charmes had made fun of it and quipped that from

13 Ladrière, Jean, "One Hundred Years of Philosophy at the Institute of Philosophy," in: David A. Borleau/John A. Dick (ed.), *Tradition and Renewal: Philosophical Essays Commemorating the Centennial of Louvain's Institute of Philosophy*, Leuven 1993, 41–78, 47.

14 Leo XIII, "The Pope's Encyclical," in: *The Catholic World* 30 (1879–1880): 111–131, 130.

now on, he was entitled to criticize Catholics unfamiliar with the latest scientific advances with reference to "the only authority before which they are willing to bow": the Pope in Rome.[15]

Charmes's irony notwithstanding, Mercier was willing to grant the point. "All this makes sense!" he wrote in response to the French journalist. "Christian philosophers feel themselves called upon by Leo XIII to take up again with renewed zeal the thorough study of natural sciences."[16] Mercier liked to quote this sentence particularly when arguing that Catholic philosophers had nothing to fear from scientific research, as it invariably confirmed the truth of their "fundamental theses."[17] Accordingly, the quotation from *Aeterni Patris* in the institute's main hall must not be misread as advocating retreat into a medieval past. As far as Mercier was concerned, the banderole was not a sign of nostalgia, but an expression of confidence in the compatibility of scholastic philosophy and modern scientific research.

In fact, Mercier's philosophical program was even more ambitious than this. In his grand scheme of things, Neo-Scholasticism was uniquely qualified to integrate "analysis" and "synthesis," or "experience" and "speculation." Although all philosophers, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, were entrusted with the task of comprehending scientific "facts" or "findings" through the prism of "principles," Mercier believed that most contemporary philosophy suffered from one-sidednesses that effectively obstructed such synthetic understanding. In his view, modern philosophy had come under the spell of "isms" such as "positivism" and "pantheism," which had in common that they unduly emphasized either the Cartesian *res extensa* ("extended thing") or the *res cogitans* ("thinking thing"). The net result, in Mercier's dramatic reading, was an inability to account for the whole of human experience, which in turn caused an intellectual fragmentation that only Neo-Scholasticism, premised on a pre-Cartesian understanding of the mind-body relation, was able to remedy:

> What happens when after almost three centuries of philosophy going from one extreme to another, between empiricism and idealism, until tired and exhausted in sterile efforts, it falls into the abyss of skepticism or throws itself desperately into the arms of vague and mysterious beliefs? There is only one philosophy … which responds adequately to the total-

15 Ch. Gabriel [pseudonym of Gabriel Charmes], untitled article on *Aeterni Patris*, in: *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires* (19 August 1879).

16 Mercier, Désiré / Van Weddingen, A., "Leo XIII and the Restoration of Philosophical Studies" (1888), in: David A. Boileau (ed.), *Cardinal Mercier's Philosophical Essays: A Study in Neo-Thomism*, Leuven 2002, 55–120, 113.

17 Ibid., 100.

> ity of the demands of our nature … [by taking] me as I am, in the integrity of my sensible and intelligent nature.[18]

Accordingly, for Mercier, the revitalization of scholastic philosophy recommended by *Aeterni Patris* had a significance not limited to Catholic students. Neo-Scholasticism carried with it a promise of synthesis, or a vision of totality, in that it "brings together the best thoughts of all systems, reunites them in a wise and harmonious ordering, preserves thinking from useless digression … and adds to the greatness a tested solidity."[19]

If this amounted to a philosophical argument in favor of Neo-Scholasticism, Mercier preferred to present it in historical terms by embedding his analysis in a grand-scale narrative of decline. According to this narrative, scholasticism had emerged in ancient Greece, in the philosophy of Aristotle, and been developed to near-perfection in the thirteenth century, especially though not exclusively by Thomas Aquinas. This "golden age of scholasticism," however, had been followed by an era of "rapid decadence," marked by the rise of nominalism, the church schism known as the Reformation, and the emergence of Cartesian philosophy with its aforementioned mind-body dualism. "The scholastic tradition had been broken for long centuries; and from that moment … began the anarchy of minds and the confusion of systems from which we are now gathering the fatal fruits."[20] For Mercier, this confusion had not only *marked* a break with the past; it had been *caused* by the hazardous experiment of thinking "independently," without wise guidance from past masters.

It was at this point that "tradition" entered Mercier's vocabulary. In his perception, the root of modern ills was a "total rupture of the philosophical tradition."[21] Likewise, the "restoration of philosophical studies" advocated by *Aeterni Patris* had to be understood as a retrieval of "the tradition of the great scholastic Doctors" or the "scientific tradition" represented by Aristotle, Albert Magnus, and Thomas Aquinas.[22] This was not the same as to elevate the *Summa Theologiae* to a canonical height or to expect a final answer to all questions from the "Angelic Doctor." Whenever Mercier mentioned Thomas, he added the name

18 Ibid., 59.
19 Ibid., 118.
20 Mercier/Van Weddingen, "Ibid.," 70, 72.
21 Ibid., 72.
22 Mercier, Désiré, "Opening Discourse for the Course on St. Thomas' Philosophy" (1882), in: Boileau, *Cardinal Mercier: A Memoir*, 296 – 313, 301; "The Creation of the Higher School of Philosophy at the University of Louvain (1889)," Ibid., 314 – 322, 318.

of Aristotle, "the greatest genius that humanity has ever known."[23] The tradition that Mercier said to care about was "the School of Aristotle and St. Thomas," the tradition of "Aristotle and … his disciples in the Middle Ages," or, in a later formulation, "the philosophy of Aristotle, developed and made precise by St. Thomas Aquinas."[24] Accordingly, what Mercier intended to revive was not Thomism *stricto sensu*, but a centuries-spanning tradition that broadly followed Aristotelian lines.

Although Mercier never spelt out his concept of tradition, implied in the foregoing is a scholastic (though not exclusively scholastic) understanding of philosophy as a collective enterprise over time. In Mercier's own words, philosophy is "the growing fruit of the efforts of generations that succeeded each other in the course of history."[25] As illustrated by this quotation, Mercier liked to conceptualize the deepening of philosophical insight over time in biological terms. "The evolution of knowing," he used to say, "is similar to that of an organism."[26] Although architectural metaphors, comparing the work of philosophy to the building of a Gothic cathedral, also occur in his writings, his favorite images were organic ones, as they allowed him to emphasize "life" and "growth" over time and to argue that tradition has a "life-giving power," which "modern" philosophers neglect to their own disadvantage.[27] And if scholastic philosophy is such a source of life, then nothing is more self-destructive than trying to think "independently," without guidance from the past. As Mercier asked rhetorically in 1882: "Since when is newness a sign of truth? Is it not preferable to be conservative than innovative, if it is conservatism that is correct and innovation that is wrong?"[28]

This understanding of tradition, finally, explains why Mercier decidedly preferred the designation "Neo-Scholastic" over "Neo-Thomist." What mattered most to him was not the thirteenth-century Thomas, however rich his *Summa* may be, but the Aristotelian tradition in its development over the course of centuries.[29] "Neo-Thomism" would draw too much attention to an individual philos-

23 Mercier, "Philosophical Assessment," 340.

24 Mercier, Désiré, "Talk Delivered by Msgr. Mercier on the 2nd of December, 1894," in: Boileau, *Cardinal Mercier's Philosophical Essays*, 253–266, at 261, 262; "The Encyclical and Philosophy" (1907), Ibid., 543–550, 547.

25 Mercier, "Philosophical Assessment," 340.

26 Mercier, "Talk," 257.

27 Mercier, "Philosophical Assessment," 338.

28 Mercier, "Opening Discourse," 306.

29 It has even been argued that Mercier was more indebted to Aristotle than to Thomas, if only because the task of synthesizing scientific results did not correspond to a Thomist understanding of philosophy. Steel, Carlos, "Aquinas and the Renewal of Philosophy: Some Observations on

opher, thereby erroneously suggesting that philosophy is at base as individual an activity as Mercier's *bêtes noires*, Descartes and Immanuel Kant, had thought it to be. The journal that Mercier launched in 1894 was therefore entitled *Revue néo-scolastique*, not *Revue néo-thomiste*. As Mercier explained in the inaugural issue, with reference to a long tradition of scholastic philosophy and with yet another paraphrase of the papal words on the wall:

> Leo XIII, in his encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, already praised the zeal of St. Thomas, of Albert-the-Great, and of, more generally, the masters of scholasticism ... and recommended that we appropriate acknowledged discoveries and modern theories, no matter from whence they came, especially if they are seen to be true. ... It is this kind of philosophy that we describe as *neo-scholastic*.[30]

III "Scholasticism Old and New"

Although Mercier left the Higher Institute of Philosophy on becoming archbishop of Mechelen in 1906, his understanding of the scholastic tradition left an indelible mark on the institute throughout the early decades of the twentieth century. This is perhaps most visible in Mercier's former student and co-editor of the *Revue néo-scolastique*, Maurice De Wulf.[31] Like Mercier, De Wulf preferred the designation "Neo-Scholasticism" so as to avoid too close association with "the thought system of *some particular individual*, whereas in reality this new philosophy is sufficiently large and comprehensive to pass beyond the doctrinal limitations of any individual thinker."[32] Also, like Mercier, De Wulf conceived of phi-

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the Thomism of Désiré Mercier," in: David A. Boileau/John A. Dick (ed.), *Tradition and Renewal: Philosophical Essays Commemorating the Centennial of Louvain's Institute of Philosophy*, Leuven 1992, 181–215, 190; Van Riet, Georges, "Cardinal Désiré Mercier (1851–1926) and the Institute of Philosophy of Louvain," in: David A. Boileau/John A. Dick (ed.), *Tradition and Renewal: Philosophical Essays Commemorating the Centennial of Louvain's Institute of Philosophy*, Leuven 1993, 1–39, 9–10.

30 D. Mercier, "Neo-Scholastic Philosophy (1894)," in: Boileau, *Cardinal Mercier: A Memoir*, 361–367, 364.

31 For De Wulf's biography, see Van Steenberghen, Fernand, "Maurice De Wulf: historien de la philosophie médiévale (1867–1947)," in: *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 46 (1948): 421–447, and Van Steenberghen, Fernand, "Maurice De Wulf (1867–1947)," in: Helen Damico (ed.), *Medieval Scholarship: Biographical Studies on the Formation of a Discipline*, vol. 3, New York 2000, et al. 43–53.

32 De Wulf, *Scholasticism Old and New*, 159.

losophy as "a synthetic study of the world by the sole data of reason"[33] and regarded thirteenth-century scholasticism as the highest developed form of synthetic thought so far produced by humankind. Even stronger than his teacher, De Wulf emphasized the essentially Aristotelian character of thirteenth-century scholasticism, which led him, to the dismay of colleagues abroad, to depict all Neo-Platonism and Averroism in thirteenth-century Europe as essentially foreign to the scholastic tradition ("Latin Averroism differs from scholastic philosophy as the Gothic cathedral differs from the Arabian mosque").[34]

De Wulf also closely followed Mercier's example in adopting the subject position of an heir vis-à-vis a philosophical "inheritance" that needed thoughtful stewardship.[35] Like Mercier, he often quoted Blaise Pascal as saying: "It is owing to tradition that the whole procession of men in the course of so many centuries may be considered as a single man, who always subsists, who learns continuously."[36] De Wulf used the same organic imagery as Mercier in advocating both loyalty to and further development of the tradition.[37] And as if this were not enough, De Wulf shared Mercier's fascination for *aggiornamento*, with reference to the same papal encyclical from 1879. His favorite quotation differed only in wording, not in substance, from Mercier's: *vetera novis augere*, or *vetera novis augere et perficere maluerunt:* "to strengthen and complete the old by aid of the new."[38]

This juxtaposing of "the old" and "the new," nonetheless, can be read as marking an emerging difference between the two Leuven philosophers. While Mercier believed that medieval scholastic philosophy hardly needed to be

33 De Wulf, Maurice, "Western Philosophy and Theology in the Thirteenth Century," in: *The Harvard Theological Review* 11 (1918): 409–432, 425.

34 De Wulf, Maurice, *Philosophy and Civilization in the Middle Ages*, Princeton 1922, 285. For the criticism elicited by De Wulf's exclusively Aristotelian focus, see Noone, Timothy, "Medieval Scholarship and Philosophy in the Last One Hundred Years," in: Brian J. Shanley (ed.), *One Hundred Years of Philosophy*, Washington, DC 2001, 111–132, 117–118 and Steel, Carlos, "From Siger of Brabant to Erasmus: Philosophy and Civilization in the Late Medieval Low Countries," in: Kent Emery, Jr./Russell L. Friedman/Andreas Speer (ed.), *Philosophy and Theology in the Long Middle Ages: A Tribute to Stephen F. Brown*, Leiden et al. 2011, 953–979, 959–961.

35 De Wulf, *Scholasticism Old and New*, 160.

36 Mercier, "Philosophical Assessment," 327; De Wulf, *Philosophy and Civilization*, 140.

37 E. g., De Wulf, *Scholasticism Old and New*, 161–162.

38 Leo XIII, "The Pope's Encyclical," 127. It is worth noting in passing that this would become a key phrase for Bernard Lonergan, too. See, e. g., Lonergan, Bernard J. F., "A New Pastoral Theology" (1973), in: Lonergan, *Philosophical and Theological Papers, 1965–1980*, ed. Robert C. Croken/Robert M. Doran, Toronto et al. 2004, 221–239, 238; "The Scope of Renewal" (1973), Ibid., 282–298, 298.

changed to serve modern needs,[39] De Wulf called more explicitly for "adaptation … to our own time."[40] For him, Neo-Scholastic philosophy was not only a "revival," but also an "adaptation" of medieval scholasticism.[41] As he argued in his *Introduction à la philosophie néo-scolastique* (1904): "The new scholasticism is more extensive than the old, being a development and growth of its doctrine."[42] Although Mercier had always insisted on the need for organic development, his emphasis had been on continuity over time, not on discontinuities that inevitably bring about change. By contrast, when De Wulf distinguished between "scholasticism old and new," he acknowledged more openly that temporal distance from the thirteenth century also implied dissociation from certain medieval philosophical positions, such as Thomas' understanding of the immortality of the soul:

> The various polemics and controversies of the medieval scholastics lose most if not all their meaning when taken out of their historical setting: those problems have developed from epoch to epoch; and all their every evolution are a proof that scholasticism has steadily moved with the march of thought, however slow may have been the stages of its progress.[43]

Two factors help explain De Wulf's sensitivity to discontinuities between the thirteenth and the twentieth centuries. Firstly, while Mercier had developed his conception of scholasticism before the ink of *Aeterni Patris* was fully dry, De Wulf wrote his *Introduction à la philosophie néo-scolastique* at a time witnessing a growing variety of "Neo-Scholastic" or "Neo-Thomist" approaches. Most of these, especially including the Italian ones, were considerably more conservative than the Leuven school in terms of their willingness to develop the scholastic heritage beyond the letter of Thomas' philosophy.[44] Leuven's project of developing a Neo-Scholastic epistemology ("criteriology"), such as carried out after Mercier's departure by Léon Noël, was therefore viewed with skepticism by those, such as the aforementioned Francesco Olgiati, who were convinced that episte-

39 D. Mercier, "The Creation of the Higher School of Philosophy at the University of Louvain" (1889), in: Boileau, *Cardinal Mercier: A Memoir*, 314–322, 317. See also Mercier, "Philosophical Assessment," 340–341: "[T]his conception of philosophy crossed the centuries without being shaken in its fundamental theses."

40 De Wulf, *Scholasticism Old and New*, ix.

41 Ibid., viii.

42 Ibid., ix.

43 Ibid., 187.

44 Coreth, Emerich, "Schulrichtungen neuscholastischer Philosophie," in: Coreth/Neidl/Pfligersdorffer, *Christliche Philosophie*, vol. 2, 397–410.

mology as such constituted a Cartesian aberration.[45] In this polarized context, De Wulf felt a greater need than Mercier to dissociate himself from "those *exclusive* admirers of the past who would fain amass all the best traditions of the Middle Ages and transmit that sacred deposit to posterity, unchanged and unchangeable."[46] While "traditionalism" for Mercier had referred exclusively to such French counter-revolutionaries as Louis de Bonald and Jean-Marie de Lamennais,[47] for De Wulf it also became a pejorative label for "rigid" and "inflexible" opponents in early twentieth-century quarrels over what loyalty to the "Angelic Doctor" implied.[48]

If this is one reason why De Wulf emphasized the "neo" more than Mercier, a second reason is that De Wulf, unlike Mercier, was an historian of philosophy. This is not to say that De Wulf had a professional inclination towards historicization. Like Mercier, he was more interested in patterns than in exceptions. He had therefore little patience with scholars whose primary aim was to show how diverse the world of medieval philosophy had been. In an attempt at escape from the "chaos of systems," De Wulf preferred to identify scholasticism with "a philosophical synthesis common to a group of the leading doctors of the West," such as Albert Magnus and Thomas Aquinas.[49] He subsequently spent many years defending this synthesis, defined in terms of shared metaphysical doctrines, against critics who accused him of "forcing the facts of history."[50] However, in the long run, this defense convinced not even himself. In subsequent editions of his *Histoire de la philosophie médiévale* (1900), De Wulf increasingly qualified his "scholastic synthesis." In the 1920s, he even went so far as to admit that the "synthesis" had been an imposition on the sources.[51] De Wulf,

45 Tredici, G./ Necchi, L./Olgiati, Fr./A. Gemelli, "Una discussione intorno alla criteriologia di Lovanio," in: *Revista di filosofia neo-scolastica* 4 (1914): 335–341.

46 De Wulf, *Scholasticism Old and New*, 158.

47 E.g., Mercier, "Philosophical Assessment," 324.

48 De Wulf, *Scholasticism Old and New*, 163.

49 Ibid., 41, 46.

50 Turner, William, review of *Scholasticism Old and New* by M. De Wulf, in: *The Philosophical Review* 17 (1908): 427–432, 429. It has become customary to contrast De Wulf's *Histoire de la philosophie médiévale* (1900) with Etienne Gilson's *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (1955), with the latter offering a "pluralist" alternative to De Wulf's "unitary" reading of scholastic philosophy. But as John Inglis convincingly argues, the two books were indebted to a similar historiographical model, derived from Joseph Kleutgen and Albert Stöckl, among others, as well as to a shared grand narrative of rise and fall. See Inglis, John, *Spheres of Philosophical Inquiry and the Historiography of Medieval Philosophy*, Leiden et al. 1998, 9–10.

51 Van Steenberghen, "Maurice De Wulf" (2000), 50–51; Inglis, *Spheres of Philosophical Inquiry*, 170–187; Wielockx, Robert, "De Mercier à De Wulf: débuts de l'"École de Louvain," in: Ruedi

in short, was struggling all his life with incongruences between the historical Thomas and nineteenth-century Neo-Scholasticism.

On the one hand, then, De Wulf's understanding of Neo-Scholasticism resembled Mercier's, especially in what one might call (with a nod to Friedrich Nietzsche) its "monumental" conception of the medieval past.[52] De Wulf showed himself a loyal disciple of Mercier, too, in insisting that "lovers of tradition" need not be "unrelenting adversaries of everything modern."[53] On the other hand, De Wulf distinguished more sharply than Mercier between the "old" and "new" and, accordingly, accepted more readily that a tradition able to encompass both the "old" and the "new" has moments of discontinuity between past and present. For De Wulf, it was a "blending of the old and new, of tradition and innovation, that is to be characteristic of the new scholasticism – *vetera novis augere et perficere*."[54]

IV "The Experience of Being"

How successful was the Higher Institute of Philosophy in this attempt to blend the old and the new? The answer depended on to whom the question was addressed. Writing in 1927, Léon Noël was optimistic. Like many other Neo-Scholastics in the interwar period, he enthusiastically observed that metaphysical questions, long suppressed by Kantian criticism, made a return to the philosophical scene, partly due to the impact of World War I. Accordingly, he believed that the prospects of a scholastically inspired metaphysics were bright: "The royal road of scholasticism now lays open for bringing together the modern intellectual spirit and Catholic faith. All the barriers have been pushed away, all the obstacles have been removed."[55] Had Neo-Scholastic philosophers in the 1880s felt like

Imbach/Alfonso Maierù (ed.), *Gli studi di filosofia medievale fra Otto e Novecento*, Rome 1991, 75 – 95, 94.

52 Indicative of this monumental conception of the medieval past is De Wulf's favorite comparison of scholastic philosophy to a Gothic cathedral, e. g., in *Philosophy and Civilization*, 8 – 9, 105, 109 – 111, 241, 285 and *Mediaeval Philosophy Illustrated from the System of Thomas Aquinas*, Cambridge MA 1922, 3, 6, 126, 148 – 149. For Nietzsche's notion of monumental history, see Jenkins, Scott, "Nietzsche's Use of Monumental History," in: *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 45 (2014): 169 – 181.

53 De Wulf, *Scholasticism Old and New*, 207.

54 Ibid., 217.

55 Noël, L., "De heropleving van het thomisme," in: A. W. Van Winckel/F. Van Goethem (ed.), *S. Thomas van Aquino: bijdragen over zijn tijd, zijn leer en zijn verheerlijking door de kunst*, Hilversum 1927, 114 – 128, 128. Similar optimism about a perceived "return to metaphysics" perme-

lonely pioneers, grossly out of joint with prevailing philosophical thinking, fifty years later they could proudly boast of their "glorious worldview against which the time is powerless."[56]

The same interwar period, though, witnessed bitter assaults on Neo-Scholasticism as taught in Leuven. The Ghent philosopher Herman De Vleeschauwer, for example, wrote a *Schets eener critiek der thomistische wijsbegeerte* (1930), in which he condemned Neo-Scholasticism for being "outside of time" and "outside of life."[57] Similarly, the Belgian novelist Gerard Walschap, who regarded De Vleeschauwer's critique as "the most important cultural document in Flanders" to have appeared in years,[58] published a widely read novel about a bright female student who committed suicide after her dissertation project in Neo-Scholastic philosophy turned out to have estranged her from real life.[59] Confidence about the Neo-Scholastic tradition among Catholic philosophers thus went hand in hand with skepticism about the suffocating effects of that same tradition among broader groups of Flemish intellectuals.[60]

To some extent, the work of Louis De Raeymaeker, a Leuven-trained philosopher who joined the faculty in 1934 and was soon entrusted with the principal courses in metaphysics, can be read as a response to this ambiguity.[61] De Raeymaeker resembled Mercier and De Wulf in being committed to a *philosophia perennis* in which metaphysics provides the necessary foundations for ethics and epistemology. Like Noël, he had high expectations of a perceived turn from "criticism" to "realism" and "metaphysics" among philosophers in interwar Europe.[62] And on top of that, he produced some of the most glowing explanations as to why a Catholic should not be ashamed of being a Neo-Scholastic: "[W]hen we,

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ated Engert, Joseph, "Metaphysik und Historismus im Christentum," in: *Hochland* 21, no. 1 (1923/24): 502–517, 638–651 and de Reynold, Gonzague, "Die Rückkehr zum Thomismus in den Ländern französischer Sprache," in: *Hochland* 26 no. 2 (1928/29): 34–47.

56 Axters, Stephanus, *Scholastiek lexicon: Latijn-Nederlandsch*, Antwerp 1937, 3.

57 De Vleeschauwer, H. J., *Schets eener critiek der thomistische wijsbegeerte*, Ghent 1930, 11.

58 Gerard Walschap to Herman J. De Vleeschauwer, 15 August 1943, in: *Brieven 1921–1950*, ed. Carla Walschap/Bruno Walschap, Amsterdam 1998, 800–801, 800.

59 Walschap, Gerard, *Sibylle*, Rotterdam 1938. For a Neo-Scholastic response, see De Petter, D. M., "Wijsgeerige bedenkingen rond 'het geval Walschap,'" in: *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 3 (1941): 277–289.

60 Heynickx, Rajesh, *Meetzucht en mateloosheid: kunst, religie en identiteit in Vlaanderen tijdens het interbellum*, Nijmegen 2008, 160–166.

61 For his biography, see Van Riet, Georges, "In memoriam Monseigneur Louis De Raeymaeker," in: *Revue Philosophique de Louvain* 68 (1970): 5–10 and Dondeyne, Albert, "Mgr. Louis De Raeymaeker," in: *Aquinas* 14 (1971): 247–256.

62 De Raeymaeker, Louis, *Inleiding tot de wijsbegeerte en het thomisme*, Mechelen et al. 1933, 133.

Catholics, practice philosophy, we feel that we are taking part in a mighty tradition, carried by a wide stream, which finds its origins in Albert and Thomas. We belong to the dynasty of old scholastics and proudly present our patents of nobility, dating from the heyday of Christianity, the thirteenth century."[63]

What this rhetoric can easily obscure, however, is that De Raeymaeker's relation to medieval scholasticism increasingly differed from those of his predecessors. First of all, De Raeymaeker changed the way in which he introduced his students to the world of medieval metaphysics. While his lectures in the 1930s had focused straightforwardly on scholastic understandings of the "concept of being,"[64] in the 1940s, De Raeymaeker tried to bring his students "into closer contact with concrete reality, especially with our conscious living and existing."[65] He therefore started with "the experience of being," which presents "the problem of being" as soon as human beings begin to reflect on their experience, and raised the question as to whether there is something like an "order of being."[66] This was more than just a didactic tool: it had substantial implications for how the nature of philosophical activity was understood. By starting in an almost Cartesian manner with the self and its experience of itself, De Raeymaeker implied that philosophical reflection has an ineluctably personal element to it. Although De Raeymaeker hastened to add that the experience of being is more than personal, given that it is an experience of a world outside the self, which as such is constrained by its object, philosophy is at base a provisional attempt at making sense of this experience – it has no immediate access to the "essence" of things.[67]

This privileged position of experience in De Raeymaeker's approach to metaphysics marked a difference from De Wulf, especially for what it meant to follow Thomas in a twentieth-century context. Whereas De Wulf had been fond of highlighting the "impersonal" character of scholastic philosophy, De Raeymaeker regretted that Thomas had not been more communicative about his personal experiences of being: "[I]t is permissible to regret that the Angelic Doctor has not left us a description – let us call it a phenomenological one – of the living basis

63 De Raeymaeker, Louis, "De philosophie van den H. Albertus den Groote," in: *Collectanea Mechliniensia* 7 (1933): 137–150, 150.

64 As evidenced by De Raeymaeker, Louis, *Ontologie: algemeene metaphysica*, Antwerp et al. 1933.

65 De Raeymaeker, Louis, *De metaphysiek van het zijn*, Antwerp 1944, 5.

66 Ibid., 30, 35, 36.

67 Ibid., 76–77. For further analysis, see Verhack, Ignace, "De 'Metafysiek van het zijn' opnieuw bekeken," in: M. Moors/J. Van der Veken (ed.), *Naar leeuweriken grijpen: Leuvense opstellen over metafysica*, Leuven 1994, 1–30.

of his theories."[68] For one cannot understand Thomas without reliving "the fundamental experience commanding the activity of philosophic thought of the Angelic Doctor," as De Raeymaeker explained in a series of 1950s articles.[69] Consequently, the project of scholastic philosophy cannot simply be continued by comprehending modern scientific "facts" through Aristotelian lenses, as Mercier had argued:

> [T]he Thomist who surmises the nature and place of the master's experience, strives to form a similar experience: an experience also quite personal and therefore joined to the temporal and spatial situation of the man who makes it. ... [T]he Thomist is a philosopher who, starting from his own experience, discovers the categories and essential theses of the master's doctrine and who endeavors thereafter to develop his thought along the lines of this doctrine.[70]

In between De Raeymaeker and Mercier, one might argue, stood Wilhelm Dilthey, the German life philosopher whom De Raeymaeker did not hesitate to acknowledge as a source of inspiration.[71]

Implied in this "experiential turn" was, in the second place, a growing interest in the historical Thomas. For if experience of being is the beginning of all metaphysics, then what matters is not only the scholastic tradition, but also the individuals who make up this tradition. As early as 1933, therefore, De Raeymaeker included a chapter on "St. Thomas' life and personality" in his *Inleiding tot de wijsbegeerte en tot het thomisme*.[72] Tellingly, the title of this textbook spoke about "Thomism." While Mercier and De Wulf had preferred "Neo-Scholastic" over "Neo-Thomist" so as to highlight the impersonal nature of scholastic philosophy, De Raeymaeker's interest in personal experience led to a change in vocabulary that also affected his concept of tradition. For De Raeymaeker, the scholastic tradition was not an organism or a cathedral-like edifice, but a community of people who, drawing on their own experiences, tried to deepen and enrich Thomas' philosophy:

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68 De Raeymaeker, Louis, "What St. Thomas Means Today," in: *The Review of Politics* 20 (1958): 3–20, 19.

69 Ibid., 18. See also De Raeymaeker, Louis, "Thomisme als levende filosofie," in: *Tijdschrift voor Philosophie* 18 (1956): 3–26, 22–24 and "The Authority of Saint Thomas Aquinas in the Church in Philosophical Matters," in: *The American College Bulletin* 36 (1957): 1–23, 21.

70 De Raeymaeker, "What St. Thomas Means," 19.

71 De Raeymaeker, Louis, "Wat is het 'wieledenken'?" in: *Ons Geloof* 26 (1940): 179–182, 179–180.

72 De Raeymaeker, Louis, *Inleiding tot de wijsbegeerte en het thomisme*, Mechelen et al. 1933.

> Who then shall be able to call himself a Thomist, from the philosophical viewpoint of the term? He who, starting from his own personal experience, forges for himself fundamental categories similar to those that St. Thomas discovered on his own, and who personally executes this work of philosophical research in a perspective proper to a man of today, all the while leaning upon the work of the Angelic Doctor in such a way as to extend it and enrich it with new meanings.[73]

Finally, although especially the young De Raeymaeker did not hesitate to situate himself in a narrative spanning seven centuries of (Neo-)Thomist philosophy,[74] the decades since *Aeterni Patris* and especially the Belgian "revival" of Thomism under Mercier developed into a more important frame of reference than the Thomist tradition *in totu*. Especially after World War II, De Raeymaeker and his colleagues increasingly identified with what they called the "Leuven school." They created a Cardinal Mercier chair, among other things, and judged the time ripe for a retrospective on the history of Neo-Scholasticism.[75] De Raeymaeker himself contributed to such a retrospective with a book-length study of Mercier and the Higher Institute of Philosophy.[76] Also, when the *Revue néo-scolastique* was renamed into *Revue philosophique de Louvain*, Noël explained that the new title better conveyed that the journal identified with a tradition of reviving Thomism known as the "school of Leuven."[77]

Why did this local tradition grow in significance, sometimes even at the cost of the global one? One answer is that an appeal to the former allowed De Raeymaeker and his colleagues to dissociate themselves on solid authority from what they perceived as "paleo-Thomism" – a pejorative category flexible enough to include various sorts of critics of the increasingly "open Thomism" advocated at Leuven.[78] Also, just as Mercier had liked to quote selectively from *Aeterni Patris*, so De Raeymaeker appealed time and again to a selected number of Mercier quotations in order to justify his own, experience-oriented approach to Neo-Thomism – even to the point of implying that Mercier himself had highlighted the fun-

73 De Raeymaeker, "Authority of Saint Thomas," 21.

74 De Raeymaeker, *Inleiding tot de wijsbegeerte*, 207–224.

75 Van Breda, H. L., "Voorwoord," in: Edward Lowyck, *Substantiële verandering en hylemorphisme: een critische studie over de neo-scholastiek*, Leuven 1948, 5–6, 5.

76 De Raeymaeker, Louis, *Le Cardinal Mercier et l'Institut Supérieur de Philosophie de Louvain*, Leuven 1952.

77 Noël, L., "[Editorial]," in: *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 46 (1944), 5*-6*, 6*.

78 De Raeymaeker, "Thomisme als levende filosofie," 3; Van Steenberghen, Fernand, *Le retour à Saint Thomas a-t-il encore un sens aujourd'hui?* Montréal: 1967, 29–36. The term originated with Berthier, J.-J., "Le néo-molinisme et le *paléo-thomisme: à* propos d'un livre du R. P. Frins," in: *Revue thomiste* 1 (1893): 83–102, 169–199, 471–508.

damental role of personal experience in philosophy.[79] It could seem, then, as if De Raeymaeker proposed yet another "scholastic synthesis," not among the doctors of the Middle Ages, but among Mercier and his successors at the Higher Institute of Philosophy: a synthesis defined by positive commitment to revision and renewal of the Thomist tradition.

V "Models for Our Imitation"

To what extent this helped pave the way for a neo-Thomism that Albert Dondeyne, speaking about his own Leuven colleagues, characterized as "more 'neo' than 'Thomist'" does not need to be settled here.[80] For the purposes of this chapter, it suffices to observe that the tradition in which postwar Leuven philosophers inscribed themselves increasingly became a tradition of negotiating the problem of "tradition." This problem entailed the challenge of remaining faithful to Thomas, the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition, and/or the Neo-Scholastic movement while engaging in open conversation with the phenomenological, hermeneutical, and existentialist schools of thought that had come to dominate the philosophical scene in postwar continental Europe. Just as "Leuven school" served as shorthand for an attitude of openness towards a Neo-Thomist *aggiornamento*, so Thomas himself came to be seen as embodying an exemplary "attitude toward tradition," as De Wulf's successor, Fernand Van Steenberghen, put it in 1950.[81]

Van Steenberghen made this argument in the context of a lecture, appropriately held on St. Thomas Day, which illustrated first and foremost his indebtedness to Mercier, De Wulf, and De Raeymaeker.[82] Like his predecessors, Van Steenberghen tried to steer a middle course between progressivist disdain for tradition and conservative repetition of the past. Like them, he preferred intellectual "evolution" over "revolution," although for him, "evolution" no longer carried organi-

79 De Raeymaeker, "Thomisme als levende filosofie," 8.

80 Dodeyne, Albert, "Rouwhulde bij de plechtige lijkdienst van Monseigneur Louis De Raeymaeker" (1970), KU Leuven, University Library, Albert Dondeyne papers, inv. no. 61, 3.

81 Van Steenberghen, Fernand, "Thomism in a Changing World," in: *The New Scholasticism* 31 (1952): 37–48, 38.

82 For his biography, see McEvoy, James/Follon, Jacques/Rosemann, Philipp W., "Vetera novis augere: à la mémoire du chanoine Fernand Van Steenberghen," in: *Bulletin de philosophie médiévale* 35 (1993): 254–258 and Troisfontaines, Claude, "In memoriam Fernand Van Steenberghen (13 février 1904–16 avril 1993)," in: *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 91 (1993): 340–345.

cist connotations.[83] Also, despite the fact that Van Steenberghen himself was a historian, he followed a classic Leuven line in defining the Neo-Thomist task in systematic terms, as reflection on the philosophical implications of scientific advances in fields as diverse as physics, biology, psychology, and ethnography: "We have a constructive work to accomplish."[84] Like De Wulf and De Raeymaeker, finally, Van Steenberghen positioned himself in a local tradition. He liked to quote the *vetera novis augere* phrase from *Aeterni Patris* that De Wulf had frequently cited[85] and followed De Raeymaeker in identifying as a "Thomist" – presumably in part because, as an assistant to De Wulf, he had personally seen how confusing, from an historian's point of view, the term "scholastic" could be.[86]

Compared to his predecessors, however, Van Steenberghen significantly broadened the tradition in which he inscribed himself. For him, the tradition on which Neo-Thomism in its Leuven version drew was not the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition as distinguished from Neo-Platonic and Augustinian ones, but the entire cultural legacy of the Occident: "[W]e must build on the solid foundation of tradition, philosophical tradition, theological tradition, humanistic tradition, cultural tradition."[87] If Van Steenberghen urged twentieth-century philosophers not to neglect "the treasures of experience and wisdom accumulated by so many generations," he did not refer to scholasticism in particular, but to a legacy as broad as "the roots of our human and Christian culture."[88]

If "tradition" came to denote such a polyphonic legacy, then loyalty to the tradition could no longer be a matter of doctrinal continuity. Van Steenberghen therefore redefined respect for tradition in analogical terms. Whenever he reflected on the tasks and challenges of twentieth-century Thomists, he pointed to analogies between the thirteenth and the twentieth century or between Thomas and Catholic philosophers in the 1950s. Just as Thomas had respected the wisdom of the ancients, so twentieth-century thinkers would be wise not to neglect the heritage of ancient and medieval philosophy. Just as Thomas had tried to bring philosophical speculation into accord with the science of his day, so mod-

83 Van Steenberghen, "Thomism in a Changing World," 41.

84 Ibid., 47.

85 Van Steenberghen, *Le retour à Saint Thomas*, 41.

86 Van Steenberghen, Fernand, "L'interprétation de la pensée médiévale au cours du siècle écoulé," in: *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 49 (1951): 108 – 119, 117.

87 Van Steenberghen, "Thomism in a Changing World," 40.

88 Ibid. This analogy became a recurring theme in Van Steenberghen's later work. See, e. g., "Homélie prononcée par M. le Chanoine F. Van Steenberghen au cours de la messe célébrée en l'honneur de saint Thomas," in: *Hommage à Monsieur le Chanoine Fernand Van Steenberghen, professeur à l'Université catholique de Louvain, à l'occasion de son 70e anniversaire, 10 mars 1974*, Leuven 1974, 9 – 11, 10.

ern Thomists would need to study symbolic logic, sociology, and mathematics. "What St. Thomas did for his century, we, his disciples, must try to do for ours. We must rethink all the problems, in the light of tradition, no doubt, but with our eyes on the new situations and needs of our times."[89]

Thomas, by implication, became a role model characterized by virtues such as "love of truth" and "esteem for tradition."[90] More than any Leuven philosopher before him, Van Steenberghen emphasized Thomas' personal example, in line with which he consistently referred to him as a "saint." Typically, when De Raeymaeker held up Thomas' love of truth, sincerity, loyalty, and humility as virtues worthy of imitation, he added that "to have the right to call oneself a Thomist, it does not suffice to take St. Thomas as a model in the sense described."[91] More important, for De Raeymaeker, was adherence to Thomas' philosophy, inspired by a reliving of Thomas' experience of being. Van Steenberghen, however, reversed the relation between doctrine and example: "The Church did not content herself with giving us St. Thomas' doctrine; she has given St. Thomas himself as a patron to us ..."[92] With reference to a favorite proof text for doctrinal revisionism – "the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life" (2 Cor. 3:6) – Van Steenberghen therefore proposed to focus, not on the letter of the *Summa*, but on "the spirit of our master" – a spirit embodied in virtues of "upright intention" and "genuine selflessness in the search for truth."[93] In Van Steenberghen's reconfiguration, then, the Thomist tradition became a praxeological one, populated with models of how to be an epistemically virtuous philosopher.

VI Conclusion

What does this tour through three quarters of a century of reflection on the nature of the Thomist tradition reveal about the adequacy of Gerald McCool's narrative scheme? A first observation is that McCool's criticism of Neo-Scholasticism for its lack of historical sensitivity resembles arguments put forward in the interwar period by figures like Walschap and De Vleeschauwer, both of whom perceived Neo-Scholasticism as a "timeless" philosophical system, which as such displayed an "old-fashioned" disinterest in the historical situatedness of philo-

89 Van Steenberghen, "Thomism in a Changing World," 45.
90 Ibid., 47.
91 De Raeymaeker, "What St. Thomas Means," 18.
92 Van Steenberghen, "Thomism in a Changing World," 38.
93 Ibid., 44, 48.

sophical thinking. If this counted already by the 1930s as a serious flaw, a failing appreciation for the "historicity" of human thought came to be regarded as an unpardonable vice especially after the period covered in this chapter, when existentialist-inspired faculty members like Albert Dondeyne placed "historicity" high on the agenda of Leuven's Higher Institute of Philosophy.[94] So, if McCool depicts Neo-Scholasticism prior to the 1960s as an exercise in ahistorical system building, this is, in fact, an actor's view.[95]

This does not imply that McCool's perspective is devoid of interpretive capacity. As shown above, a figure like De Wulf was grappling all his life with growing tensions between detailed historical research and what he called a "scholastic synthesis." As such, De Wulf offers a vivid illustration of what McCool perceives as a reluctance among Neo-Scholastic philosophers to privilege historical accuracy over systematic coherence. From this it does not follow, however, that De Wulf defended a timeless "system" or conceived of "history" only in negative terms. To the contrary, even more than Mercier, De Wulf felt the distance that separated him from the age of Thomas – a distance not only in time, but also in mentalities. None of the Leuven philosophers examined in this chapter even remotely tried to conceal this distance.[96] They all added, how-

94 With reference to Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel, and others, Albert Dondeyne lectured widely on "historicity" and "philosophy of history." See KU Leuven, University Library, Albert Dondeyne papers, inv. no. 305, "Existentialisme en godsaffirmatie" (15 October 1950); inv. no. 325, "De historiciteit in de moderne existentiële wijsbegeerte" (8 October 1955); inv. no. 326, "De mens en zijn geschiedenis" (undated). In the same early 1950s, the Philosophical Society of Leuven devoted a conference to philosophy of history, while Karel Bellon and Henri-Irénée Marrou, among others, were invited to the Institute to address the relation between philosophy of history and scholastic metaphysics: Wylleman, A., "Studiedagen van het 'Wijsgerig Gezelschap te Leuven' (6 and 7 April)," in: *Tijdschrift voor Philosophie* 13 (1951): 358–362; [n/a] "Voordrachten," in: *Mededelingen van het Wijsgerig Gezelschap te Leuven* 3 (1952), 4*; [n/a] "De Kardinaal Mercier-leerstoel aan het Instituut," Ibid., 5*–6*. Finally, it is worth noting that by the 1960s, philosophy of history was seen as an appropriate teaching subject for a special chair in Thomist philosophy that the Institute helped create in Singapore. See Université Catholique de Louvain (Louvain-la-Neuve), Louis De Raeymaeker papers, inv. no. 59, course outline (15 January 1965).

95 For similar criticism, see Cessario, Romanus, "An Observation on Robert Lauder's Review of G. A. McCool, S. J.," in: *The Thomist* 56 (1992): 701–710.

96 As such, the Leuven Neo-Scholastics distinguished themselves from more conservative ("strict observance") Neo-Thomists, especially in Italy, where figures such as Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange and the aforementioned Francesco Olgiati, partly in response to the perceived dangers of "modernist" thinking, read Thomas through hermeneutical lenses that left considerably less space for considerations of context and change over time. See Cenacchi, "Agostino Gemelli" and Peddicord, Richard, *The Sacred Monster of Thomism: An Introduction to the Life and Legacy of Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange*, O.P., South Bend 2005, esp. 119–135.

ever, that past-present relations become empty if discontinuity is all what can said about them. Accordingly, they reflected, each in their own way, on how continuity and discontinuity could be thought together or, more concretely, on what loyalty to a philosophical past could mean if that past turned out to differ significantly from the present. In other words, what Leuven philosophers from Mercier to Van Steenberghen had in common was that they tried to steer a middle course between a denial of historicity (continuity is all there is) and an exaggerated emphasis on it (discontinuity is all there is).

The thesis put forward in this chapter is that they did so in terms of "tradition." While "historicity" and "philosophy of history" entered the classrooms of Leuven's Higher Institute of Philosophy only in the 1950s, "tradition" was the category through which Leuven philosophers from the 1880s to the 1950s reflected on their past-present relations. Although "tradition," from the late 1950s onwards, acquired connotations of dogmatism and static-mindedness in societies that liked to conceive of themselves as "post-traditional,"[97] it would be distorting to project these connotations back on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. If this chapter has shown anything, it is that "tradition" in the hands of Mercier, De Wulf, De Raeymaeker, and Van Steenberghen allowed for various sorts of dynamism. While all four men underscored the need for tradition, they defined this concept in different ways, even to such an extent that the doctrinal continuity highlighted by Mercier became near-absent in Van Steenberghen. "Tradition" was therefore not synonymous to a denial of "history" but, to the contrary, an answer to the question what loyalty to Thomas and his interpreters across the centuries could mean in the light of fundamental dissimilarities between the thirteenth and the twentieth centuries.[98]

97 A term popularized by Walt Rostow, among others, in *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, Cambridge 1960 before it became associated with Robert Bellah and, especially, Shmuel Eisenstadt.

98 This chapter is based on research conducted during a summer stay at the KU Leuven, where I enjoyed the hospitality of the research unit Cultural History since 1750. I thank Jo Tollebeek for his friendship and help, Agnès Desmazières, Rajesh Heynickx, Carlos Steel, and Kaat Wils for stimulating conversations, library staff at the KU Leuven and the Université Catholique de Louvain (Louvain-la-Neuve) for kind assistance with archival material, and the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) for generous funding.

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