

ETIENNE GILSON

Three Quests in Philosophy

Etienne Gilson was one of the most influential intellectuals and philosophers of the twentieth century. Some have credited him with expanding the spectrum of philosophical thought that had previously been limited by nineteenth-century analysts and positivists. Gilson devoted six decades to the study of the major philosophical figures of the Middle Ages. His interpretations of them are justly seen as new and insightful, and have exercised enormous influence on research in philosophy and on its presentation in the classroom. A "Gilson Society" has been active for years, and the Institut catholique in Paris has created a Gilson Chair in Metaphysics. A French publisher has announced a multi-volume publication of his complete works.

These seven previously unpublished lectures - Gilson termed them "Quests" - represent his mature thought on three key philosophical questions: the nature of philosophy, "species," and "matter." These are issues of perennial and pertinent interest to both philosophers and scientists. Gilson presents them here with his characteristic clarity, sense, and humour.

THE ETIENNE GILSON SERIES 31

ETIENNE GILSON

Three Quests in Philosophy

- The Education of a Philosopher
- In Quest of Species
- In Quest of Matter

Edited by
Armand Maurer

Foreword by James K. Farge



PONTIFICAL INSTITUTE OF MEDIAEVAL STUDIES

Acknowledgement

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Aid to Scholarly Publications Program, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Gilson, Étienne, 1884–1978

Three quests in philosophy / Etienne Gilson ; edited by Armand Maurer.

(The Etienne Gilson series, ISSN 0708–319X ; 31)

The education of a philosopher first published in French under title:

Réflexions sur l'éducation philosophique. Translated by James K. Farge.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Complete contents: The education of a philosopher – In quest of species – In quest of matter.

ISBN 978-0-88844-731-9

1. Philosophy. 2. Species – Philosophy. 3. Matter – Philosophy.
4. Philosophy and science. 5. Gilson, Étienne, 1884–1978. 6. Philosophers – France – Biography. I. Farge, James K., 1938– II. Maurer, Armand A. (Armand Augustine), 1915–2008 III. Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies IV. Title. V. Series.

B2430.G41M28 2008

194

C2008-905200-5

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Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies

59 Queen's Park Crescent East

Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 2C4

www.pims.ca

MANUFACTURED IN CANADA

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Foreword

This slim volume contains seven previously unpublished lectures by Etienne Gilson.¹ He delivered the first of them, “The Education of a Philosopher,” in Montréal in 1963. The next three, grouped under the title “In Quest of Species,” were delivered in Toronto in January 1972. Gilson composed the last three, which he titled “In Quest of Matter,” at his home in Cravant (Yonne), France; but his advanced age and declining health prevented his travelling to Canada. He therefore sent them to Laurence K. Shook in Toronto with the hope that they might eventually be published. “That is why I am anxious to do the job,” wrote the late Father Armand Maurer, Gilson’s student and disciple, in 2006.²

The first lecture was prompted when a group of students in philosophy at the Université de Montréal invited Gilson to speak at their inaugural “Semaine de Philosophie” on Tuesday, 19 March 1963. An audio tape recording was made, and some of the students later typed a transcription of it for private circulation. For forty-four years the lecture remained unknown except to those students who were present to hear it.³ Then, in June 2007, Dr Raymond Fredette of Fitch Bay, Québec, who had been one of those students, made its existence known to me in my capacity as Librarian of the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies. He prepared a digital copy from the original typescript and sent it to me.

1. Just before going to press, I have learned that the French version of the first lecture has been published under the title, “Réflexions sur l’éducation philosophique,” with no annotations, in the journal *Conférence* 26 (2008): 611–631. The following correction to its introductory note should be made: the French text came to us directly from Dr Raymond Fredette, not from the Institute archives. I gave a copy to Professor Brian Stock, who then communicated it to the editors of *Conférence*.
2. Letter to Father Lawrence Dewan, OP, in November 2006.
3. Laurence K. Shook, *Etienne Gilson* (Toronto, 1984), makes no mention of it.

It was with great excitement and pleasure that Armand Maurer first read the lecture by his esteemed friend reflecting on his own career as a philosopher and on the principles that guided him in preparing others for that career. Father Maurer clearly felt as if he were reliving some of the experiences he and Gilson had shared first as student and teacher and later in their long professional collaboration. Thinking that it might be published with the six other lectures by Gilson on which he had been working for some time, he asked me to translate it into English.

At the same time, however, Father Maurer was somewhat troubled by what seemed to be an inconsistency in the lecture which, he feared, might confuse some of its readers. In a short note to me about this, he pointed out how, not far into the lecture, when Gilson is speaking of the differences between philosophy and the sciences, he seems to limit the philosopher's field of interest to concepts (which he does not define) and to reserve the study of reality to the scientist. He added that, in this first instance, Gilson "sounds like a Platonist – something he surely was not!"⁴ In the same note to me, however, Father Maurer cited the later section of the lecture where Gilson takes quite a different tack when he says, "philosophy is really interesting only when it

4. An anonymous reader of this manuscript has commented that, very early in his career, Gilson elaborated upon philosophy as concerned with the necessary, impersonal sequences of ideas. See "Le rôle de la philosophie dans l'histoire de la civilisation," in *Proceedings of the Sixth International Congress of Philosophy, Harvard University, ... 1926*, ed. Edgar Sheffield Brightman (New York, 1927), 529–535. Ten years later, however, Gilson was careful to note that the origin of those ideas, or concepts, is grounded in and governed by reality (*Le réalisme méthodique* [Paris, 1936], ch. 3). For translations of this latter source see the Bibliography of Works Cited.

Armand Maurer himself had commented on this subject in a note written at an earlier time and only recently found among his papers: "Gilson argued that youth is no time for metaphysics; yet he began with it, and only later in life did he delve into the philosophy of nature or physics. Aristotle started with physics and came later to metaphysics."

concentrates on reality.” He urges the aspiring philosopher to “start with a real object and a real knowledge of that object,” and then hammers home the point with this: “One can philosophize about everything provided that it be about *something*.” Father Maurer was now confident that these remarks, coming at the end of the lecture, would reveal the real position of the Gilson he knew so well. He also sensed that the seven lectures published together could serve to throw light on the long, continuing debate about whether Gilson believed there is a philosophy of nature.⁵ In his note to me, Father Maurer concluded, “In the [six lectures on species and matter] he accepts a philosophy of nature – and not just of the concept of nature but in the light of metaphysics.” Finally, just two days before his death on 22 March 2008, he told me to publish the first lecture – just as he had originally planned – as an introductory essay to the other six lectures. He felt confident that readers would recognize in them Gilson’s position on this controversy, adding that the six lectures on species and matter illustrate and confirm, each in its own distinct way, the principles which Gilson expounds in the first one, “The Education of a Philosopher.” As was his custom, Armand Maurer was philosophizing to the very end.

Father Maurer had worked especially hard on editing the three lectures which Gilson entitled “In Quest of Species” and in composing the “Introduction” to them. The subject of these lectures lent itself in a special way to Armand Maurer’s life-long love of science and his conviction that science and philosophy should work, each in its own sphere, to elucidate truth. But his waning strength and final illness prevented him from devoting equal time

5. On this see Ralph Nelson, “Two Masters, Two Perspectives: Maritain and Gilson on the Philosophy of Nature,” in *Wisdom’s Apprentice: Thomistic Essays in Honor of Lawrence Dewan, O.P.*, ed. Peter A Kwasniewski (Washington, D.C., 2007), 214–236. [Armand Maurer died before he could read or comment on this article.]

to editing the three lectures which Gilson called collectively “In Quest of Matter” and prevented him from composing an introduction for them. To fill this gap, I have drawn on the short historical context which Laurence K. Shook provided for them in his biography of Gilson.⁶ This seemed an appropriate solution, since Father Shook had corresponded with Gilson about the lectures and later studied them in order to comment on them in the biography. As well, Shook was attuned to Gilson’s thought, since he was the translator of the fifth edition of Gilson’s *Le thomisme*.⁷ Years later, he began the translation of its sixth and final edition,⁸ which Maurer reviewed and completed after Shook’s death.

In editing the lectures, Father Maurer was intent on respecting the integrity of Gilson’s texts. He thus placed square brackets around his own footnotes in order to distinguish his editorial interventions from the footnote references that Gilson had supplied. He kept the latter intact, even in cases where more modern editions had become available, although in some cases he and I supplemented them with bibliographical details. Noting that Gilson quoted Darwin’s *Origin of Species* from at least two different editions – the sixth edition (London, 1872; several reprints), which was the last in which Darwin introduced changes, and the *Great Books of the Western World* edition (Chicago, 1952) – we have cited both in each case. Unless otherwise noted, English translations in the texts of the six “Quest” lectures are by Gilson himself. The Bibliography of works cited (compiled by me) comprises works used by Gilson, Maurer, and me.

I am grateful to Father Lawrence Dewan, OP, who discussed several aspects of this manuscript with me, and to Prof. R. James Long, who supplied some references for it. The two anonymous

6. *Etienne Gilson*, 388–389.

7. *The Christian Philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas* (New York, 1956; repr. Notre Dame, Ind., 1983, 1994).

8. *Thomism: The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas* (Toronto, 2002).

appraisers who read the manuscript for the Institute's Department of Publications made several helpful suggestions, especially about footnote references to the texts.

Etienne Gilson was seventy-nine years old when he spoke to the students in Montreal. He was eighty-eight when he delivered the lectures on species in Toronto and eighty-nine when he composed those on matter. In this thirtieth anniversary of Gilson's death, which occurred on 19 September 1978, the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies is pleased to publish these seven examples of his mature thought. We see them as a contribution to the renewed interest in Gilson's work and career that is manifested by the activities of the "Gilson Society for the Advancement of Christian Philosophy," by the creation, five years ago, of a Gilson Chair in Metaphysics at the Institut catholique in Paris, and by the growing spate of monographs, theses, articles, editions, and translations about and by Gilson. The recent announcement by his French publisher, Librairie Vrin, of its intention to publish the *Oeuvres complètes* of Gilson is only one more confirmation of the enduring value of his life's work.

James K. Farge