
Scholasticism as the Intellectual Response to Postmodern Chaos

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Abstract: *In a world increasingly defined by fragmentation, deconstruction, and ideological exhaustion, the scholastic method-rooted in the medieval tradition of sic et non and perfected by thinkers like Aquinas and Albertus Magnus-offers a rigorous yet supple framework for intellectual inquiry. This chapter argues for the revival of scholasticism as the most coherent response to postmodern chaos. Through its dialectical method, existential grounding in esse, and unwavering pursuit of truth, scholasticism not only withstands postmodern critiques but also transforms them into new pathways toward intelligibility, unity, and metaphysical clarity.*

1. Introduction: The Crisis of Meaning and the Return to Method

In the wake of postmodern disillusionment, the academy finds itself suspended between ironic despair and deconstructed pluralism. Language has been shattered, metaphysics abandoned, and truth replaced with narratives of power. In this fog of intellectual fragmentation, a rediscovery is taking place among serious scholars who sense the insufficiency of our contemporary methods. What we need is not novelty for novelty's sake, but a revival of a method that offers coherence without closure, openness without relativism: the scholastic method.

Far from being a fossil of medieval rigidity, the scholastic method is a living intellectual tradition rooted in dialectical tension, existential grounding, and metaphysical clarity. Born in the high Middle Ages and perfected by thinkers such as St. Thomas Aquinas and Albertus Magnus, the scholastic method is not only relevant-it is necessary. It represents the most rigorous and balanced intellectual tool available for dealing with the complexities of a postmodern world.

What Is the Scholastic Method?

The scholastic method is more than a style of disputation. It is a disciplined process of inquiry that integrates reason, experience, tradition, and revelation. Its core is the dialectic of quaestio, wherein a disputed question is presented, multiple objections are rigorously examined, authoritative sources are brought in opposition (*sed contra*), and a reasoned answer (*respondeo*) is given. Each objection is then answered individually (*ad primum, ad secundum, etc.*).

This approach, most famously codified in the *Summa Theologiae* of Aquinas, forces the thinker to inhabit opposing views with full intellectual charity before resolving the tension. It embodies what Peter Abelard called *sic et non*-yes and no. The goal is not synthesis by compromise, but truth through rigorous encounter.

The Method's Medieval Roots and Latin Form

The roots of the scholastic method lie in the cathedral schools of the 12th century and were crystallized in the universities of Paris and Oxford. The term *disputatio* reflects the form of public debate, while the *quaestio disputant* represents the formal written elaboration. Latin was the chosen vehicle for these exercises-not for aesthetic reasons, but because it allowed conceptual precision. Words like *esse*, *actus*, *potentia*, *substantia*, and *accidents* carried layers of metaphysical and ontological density that modern languages often fail to capture.

Albertus Magnus, mentor to Aquinas, was instrumental in integrating Aristotelian philosophy with Christian theology, paving the way for a method that could engage the best of pagan wisdom while remaining grounded in divine revelation. This universality made scholasticism

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uniquely suited to engage not only theological debates but also scientific, ethical, and political inquiries.

Elasticity and Rigidity: The Scholastic Balance

To call the scholastic method 'elastic' is a misnomer if it implies relativism. Scholasticism is not infinitely malleable. Rather, it is intellectually tensile: capable of absorbing and responding to diverse intellectual pressures without breaking its connection to ontological reality. Postmodern thought often collapses under the weight of its own skepticism. By contrast, scholasticism bends and rebounds-because it is rooted in *esse*, in the act of being itself.

This is what makes Aquinas radically different from modern dialecticians. For Aquinas, the real is intelligible because it is caused by Being who is *ipsum esse subsistens*-subsistent being itself. The world, though mysterious, is knowable. Thus, while the scholastic method entertains and incorporates paradoxes, it does so in pursuit of unity grounded in reality.

The Sic et Non-Tradition: Dialogue without Collapse

The tradition of *sic et non*, first made famous by Abelard, was not an invitation to indecision but to dialectical maturity. Abelard compiled contradictory statements from Church Fathers without offering resolutions, forcing students to think, analyze, and harmonize. Aquinas refined this tradition by resolving contradictions through the principle of analogical predication, metaphysical hierarchy, and epistemological clarity.

In a postmodern classroom, contradictions are often celebrated as ends in themselves. The scholastic method sees them as beginnings-launchpads into deeper understanding. Where deconstruction leaves us suspended, scholasticism drives us toward intelligible coherence.

Existential Grounding in Thomism

Modern philosophy often divorces thought from existence. The Cartesian turn inaugurated an inward spiral that eventually led to

Heidegger's angst and Derrida's *différance*. Aquinas, however, begins not with consciousness but with *esse*. Being is first in the order of reality and of intellection. The act of being (*actus essendi*) is what gives form to all essences and meaning to all inquiry.

This existential metaphysics enables the scholastic method to address the most profound questions of human life—freedom, purpose, suffering, beauty—without collapsing into subjectivism. Scholasticism does not ignore human experience; it situates it within an ordered universe suffused with intelligibility.

Avery Dulles, in his chapter on scholasticism in *The Craft of Theology*, notes that 'the scholastic mind seeks universality, order, and permanence... because it believes that truth is not a passing construct, but a participation in the eternal.' This remark echoes the scholastic spirit: the confidence that human reason, though finite, can meaningfully engage eternal truths.

Why the Scholastic Method Matters Now

In a world dominated by sound bites, binary oppositions, and ideological echo chambers, the scholastic method offers an antidote. It trains minds to listen, to argue fairly, to love the truth more than victory. It allows space for mystery without sacrificing clarity. It integrates science and philosophy, faith and reason, ancient texts and contemporary realities.

Moreover, it can absorb critiques from postmodern thinkers without being destroyed by them. Derrida, Foucault, and others reveal real problems—but they lack the tools for rebuilding. Scholasticism gives us both critique and construction.

2. Conclusion: A Method for the Future

The scholastic method is not a museum piece. It is an intellectual engine waiting to be reignited. We need not merely return to the Middle Ages; we must bring the method forward, applying its rigor and breadth to neuroscience, AI, ecological ethics, global politics, and education.

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Let us not underestimate the genius of the medieval mind. It saw truth not as a weapon, but as a friend discovered through patient inquiry. In the age of the fragmented self and the liquefied university, we need the tensile strength of the scholastic method-its ordered questioning, its existential grounding, and above all, its love of truth.

As Pope John Paul II wrote in *Fides et Ratio*, 'Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth.' The scholastic method is the spine between those wings.

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