1. ‘If there is a “Shakespeare of Science” his name is Aristotle’. So, Iris Murdoch. But the Shakespeare of science has found little favour in recent centuries, whether in natural or moral science. In moral science Aristotle is censured from several sides. Kantians declare him at fault for his alleged neglect of duty and the moral law. The matrix of Aristotle’s ethical reflections is discarded by the episodists (whose name is legion), those who cede no place to the going concern, to the idea of a career, to the growth of character; on all of which Aristotle sets great store.

A third accusation is that Aristotle preaches a higher egocentricity, that he is a utilitarian at heart. Among those who sustain this delation are one wing of 20th Century neo-Scholastic philosophers, including such figures as Maritain and Gauthier and Little. This neo-Scholastic critique is, historically speaking, a palace revolt, wherein the revered Philosopher of high medieval circles is deposed and disgraced. It is startling that he who has been a trusted moral preceptor to countless generations should now be declared an impostor; and puzzling that the exposure should have been so long delayed—a circumstance which arouses a suspicion from the outset that the critics may be imagining a vain thing.

The purpose of this paper is to vindicate Aristotle as a moralist against his neo-Scholastic detractors.

2. Let us first distinguish the charge of utility from a milder and more legitimate observation anent Aristotle’s ethics, namely that the ethics is semi-hypothetical. This must be acknowledged; nor could it be otherwise in Aristotle’s circumstances. The word ‘ought’ in its full categorical force awaited on Sinai. The gentiles knew ‘fault’ well enough. But it was on Sinai that fault became sin, a breach of personal covenant with God, who has the right to command.

Aristotle, as a physician of souls and a master of the interior life, clarifies for us the natural end of life and recommends sound courses thereto. But he must rely on the patient’s vigour to provide the moving force in response. If the patient is heedless, Aristotle can do do more; he has no authority to command in the name of God; he cannot bring the reproach of sin to stir the conscience of the erring. The most he can look to in making the hypothetical actual is the external suasions of the civil law in teaching good habits.

Such is not peculiar to Aristotle, but is the predicament of all gentile
ethics; it can point to the divine archetype and recommend its imitation as something meet and right for man to do; but since the mysterious divinity had not yet vouchsafed his revelation and covenant to the gentiles, recommendation cannot rise to the dignity of clear obligation.

In this matter rooted popular convictions and the themes of the poets went deeper than the philosophers’ explicit formulations. There was a general presentiment of something more demanding than fault; a diffuse sense of being under command, or incurring guilt by wrong doing; a sense which sometimes, as with Antigone and Socrates, became an insistent imperative as the word of divine law. Aristotle was animated by this same presentiment.

While Plato at times may have been reluctant to concede that in the end, when moved by the ultimate instincts, philosopher and plain man are on a par, Aristotle is always respectful of popular wisdom, while cautious of its cloudy and partial formulation. He is very conscious that there are regions where philosophy is out of its depth and had better keep respectful silence. Modesty forbids him to profess superior wisdom about ultimate sanctions when he has no more light than other men. Accordingly, Aristotle confines himself professorially to exploring the entrance porch, the gates of virtue and vice, at which exploration he is supremely competent. He leaves it to each man to make out for himself, as best he may, the intuited path beyond.

‘Virtue, when it can be philosophised of, has become aware of itself, is sickly and beginning to decline’. Allowing for the hyperbole, Aristotle would not have dissented from Carlyle. For Aristotle, too, looks to the unselfconsciousness of the formed character, and derides those who chatter about moral philosophy, taking philosophy as a substitute for doing aright instead of an ancilla. It is not philosophy, but habituation in the nomos, which gives dynamism to the moral life; philosophy is for discrimination and discipline.

We conclude then that what is sometimes imputed to Aristotle as a fault, is in fact the virtue of good sense and modesty. That his ethics is wanting in explicit expression of ultimate sanction is not a weakness but a sign of strength. In particular, his restraint does not render the ethics egocentric in reference. On the contrary, the ethics is respectful and reverential, giving the glory always to the Principal, not to the subordinate. (An earnest of Creation: vide infra). It is an ethics looking forward to its consummation in faith, when it will cease to be a hypothetical imperative and become categorical. St. Thomas was alive to this orientation of the ethics, this waiting on God, and so was able to rejoice in the work which Aristotle had begun.

3. Let us turn now to the charge of utility or self-centredness. Although the
critics agree in their conclusion, they adduce various grounds for their accusation.

Maritain professes to find a fundamental defect in Aristotle’s ethical vision. According to Maritain’s reading of the texts, Aristotle never succeeds in distinguishing clearly between Happiness and Good. As a result, Maritain believes, the Good is referred to Happiness and subordinated to Happiness:

Because this distinction between the Good and Happiness is nowhere clearly elucidated in his moral system, Aristotle leaves us in a state of ambiguity. In spite of everything, in the last analysis his moral teaching leaves us enclosed in love of ourselves.¹

Maritain hints, rather obscurely, that Aristotle may have meant more than this, that he was writing under veils. But as for what Aristotle says explicitly, Maritain is resolute:

Happiness as ultimate subjective end did not lead the Philosopher to discover a supreme Good which is loved more than Happiness, a Good worth more than Happiness, and for the love of which our Happiness itself is loved. Thus the supreme Good was identified with Happiness. The last End relative to the human subject, the last End as my fulfilment or my supreme perfection, or as End in which my nature and my being are realized, the last End taken subjectively, blocked Aristotle’s vision of the last End in and for itself.²

The reproach is more in sorrow than in anger, but the implication is plain: that Aristotle has reverted to man as the measure of all things, in the reprehensible sense of that phrase. An analogy: a member of a mountaineering team should be anxious of his physical fitness primarily so as not to let down the team. He would be a poor comrade if his distress at a twisted ankle were entirely self-pity. Yet the latter, on Maritain’s rendering, is what Aristotle is counselling in the greatest matters. Even without further enquiry, the accusation seems highly improbable, if not preposterous.

Maritain, it appears, has ignored the orientation of Aristotle’s ethics; he disregards the fact that it is awaiting complete statement at the appointed time; he mistakes its silences for depravity.

4. While Maritain locates the source of alleged error within the ethics, others (e.g. Gauthier and Little) believe that the source is in Aristotle’s

2. Ibid, p.50.
theology. That theology, it as alleged, is so defective that it corrupts the ethics.

The transcendental passages in *Met.* A Chs. 7 and 9 are taken to mean that the Deity is completely turned within himself, unaware of the existence of the world, in no way the Creator and Commander. The eternal Divinity and the eternal World are juxtaposed; lower things aspire to be God-like according to their various natures; but there is no reciprocity, and the conversation as well as being unilateral is accidental, or as Little expresses it:

Because man is independent in being of God he has no natural order to God. . . . Man desires God because God, from man's point of view, just happens to be found the most perfect model for his own life in reality. He desires God subsequently to the constitution of his nature, but not by that constitution. Hence man's first and radical allegiance is to himself.3

Little is harsh in his words of condemnation: 'In the last analysis Aristotelean morality is a mercenary bargain.'4

According to this reading of the Stagirite, we discover that the Deity is the perfection of the interior life and adopt him as the best model for our imitation; our love of God is not filial love but cupboard love; we do not serve God for God's sake, but as an aid to our own self-perfection. Aristotle's moral prescription is thus ultimately one of enlightened selfishness with the Deity used as a patron, a patron who would be abandoned if the benefits dried up. Aristotle, like Kant, makes the Deity ancillary; not the glory of God but the moral perfection of man is the end of the universe.

5. In another place5 I have defended Aristotle's theology, maintaining that it is implicitly creationist, and that the ascription to Aristotle of a remote and heedless Deity is mistaken. If this be granted, then the premise of Little's argument collapses. But it remains to enquire if Aristotle's moral philosophy, considered on its own merits, warrants censure.

All the critics agree on their conclusion: that whatever the source, Aristotle is guilty of a fundamental inversion of right order; that he sees the worship of God to be commendable only as an agency, a useful exemplar, promoting self-perfection or social welfare.

To assimilate worship to egotism, to regard religion in a utilitarian light, is indeed a common human failing, sometimes in forms so subtle that one does not notice its onset. Thus if a City Council resolves that in view of the general decline of morals we should have a religious revival, the inspiration

is equivocal. A similar ambivalence haunts the academic profession: in what proportion is the brilliant lecturer actuated by love of truth and disinterested zeal for souls, or by pride? Again, the politicising of religion: to what extent is it legitimate charity, and to what extent a bending of eternal verities to the furtherance of some temporal end?

However, the imputation directed at Aristotle is graver. The Philosopher has not the excuse of inadvertence. His, if it be so, is the knowing refusal, like that of Callicles, the brilliant worldly man in Plato’s dialogue.

Sed contra, it is proper to observe that St. Thomas Aquinas, no mean student of Aristotle’s moral theology, seems to have found nothing mercenary therein.

6. Such critics as Maritain and Little create a dichotomy of altruism and egoism where properly there should be none. In cavilling at Aristotle’s counsel to happiness in self-perfection and acceptance of reward they seem intent on playing Fénelon to Aristotle’s Bossuet, heedless of the pit which rigorists dig for themselves. For is there anything more insidiously self-centred than calculated self-sacrifice? Surely Aristotle is right in judging that genuine philia is neither selfish nor altruistic, but stands above both. It is such a union of selves that in loving the other, wishing the other well for his own sake, one loves oneself in the same act, though that was not one’s direct intention. Whereas altruism is the husk of a dead love. He who resorts to altruism as a substitute for love invites Bentham’s derisive rejoinder that altruism is only egoism in disguise.

On this first count then we find that the fault lies not with Aristotle but with the critics: they have failed to rise to Aristotle’s vantage point.

The matter of observance and reward is subtle, requiring careful attention to priorities. A man might be reluctant to embark on a course of action if there were no prospect of reward, whether intrinsic or extrinsic. But it does not follow that he is performing the action for the sake of the reward. Provided that the priorities are kept right, disinterestedness is normally complemented by reward, without detriment to the disinterestedness, but rather as a grace upon it, or as an obsonium to bread, which facilitates the performance of the act.

To disdain reward may be a mark of pride or affectation (or more innocently, of diffidence) rather than of moral superiority. He who saves a man from drowning and refuses afterwards to accept his thanks; the victorious athlete who publicly declines the laurel, thereby refusing to share his triumph with the onlookers: these hardly qualify for the higher ranks of moral attainment. Such would not be Aristotle’s idea of the good man, but rather of the megalopsuchos, a misdevelopment of character which Aristotle sketches with irony.
To seek the vision of God in purity of heart—as Scripture has it, and Aristotle too in his own precursory phrases—and in so doing accept gladly the intrinsic reward of happiness, is not an improper conjunction. Indeed, if the heart is pure they are scarce distinguishable, because the happiness attained is of such a kind as would appeal only to the virtuous man. In happiness, or flourishing, the final reward is to be. When Bunyan’s Christian runs forth crying Life, Life! does he not mean the same as Lord, Lord? Thus the force of that frequent Biblical phrase which is such a stumbling block to rigorists, ‘Your reward shall be great’; and the innocence of much Christian apologetic in all ages which to the unwary might seem to be utilitarian. A like exegesis extended to some of Aristotle’s phrases clears the Stagirite from the imputation of utility.

Divines of former times weighed the question of contrition (arising from love of God) and attrition (hope of Heaven and fear of Hell-fire). The sufficiency of attrition under certain conditions for a Pass, though not with Honours, was the orthodox verdict—in which the theologians were more clement than was Plato who in Republic ii and Laws x damns all attritionists out of hand.

Now enters Maritain, who with something of a Jansenist note seems intent on failing Aristotle in the examination, tacitly on the ground that he is an attritionist. Whether or not attritionists can be saved, there is in truth no evidence that Aristotle was given to attrition. If this point can be established, Aristotle escapes the fowler’s snare set by the peasant of the Garonne, and may even be a candidate for Honours!

7. It is evident that Aristotle’s frequent employment of subjective language about man’s last end does not necessarily condemn his system to utility. If the order of priorities is right, then the realisation of my perfection, the subjective last end, serves as a tribute to the objective last end, the supreme Good.

The question then is: are Aristotle’s priorities in the right order? Let us put the two paths in this way: ‘Praise God from whom all blessings flow.’ Does this mean that we praise God because blessings flow? Or that blessings flow because we praise God? An examination of the Nicomachean Ethics leaves no doubt where the Stagirite stands. He who in any situation resorts straightway to the principal, the measure, the fountain, the archetype, the being; who points out that a man is not literate because he writes correctly, but writes correctly because he is literate (Nic. Eth. II, 4); who observes that we do not value honours in themselves, but only in confirmation that we are worthy of honour, that we are someone (Nic. Eth. I, 5); who ranks still actuality above all (Nic. Eth. VII, 14): he would undoubtedly affirm that blessings flow because we praise God, not vice versa. A utilitarian is ready
to praise anything if so doing elicits blessings. But Aristotle's face is set very firmly against this course; he combats it in every form in which it arises, and stigmatises it (as Plato had done), as flattery. To charge Aristotle with advocating allegiance to God as flattery with a view to obtaining benefits is thus an egregious error.

It is proper to observe how closely St. Thomas concurs with Aristotle on this matter: 'It does not follow that God is good because He causes goodness; but rather, on the contrary, He causes goodness in things because He is good.' (S. Th. I, 13,2) St. Thomas further observes: 'Whatever good we attribute to creatures pre-exists in God, and in a more excellent and higher way.' This mode of eminence is central to the negative way of the Fathers, though not by them formulated as clearly as by St. Thomas. It is implicit in Aristotle, who is thus a precursor of apophatic theology—a matter which becomes relevant later in this paper.

8. In confirmation, let us look at Aristotle's remarks on wonder as the beginning of wisdom with which he commences the *Metaphysics*. Here he is at pains to distinguish the liberal from the utilitarian. Wondering that things are as they are, driven by a rage to know, we do not rest until we have discerned the ultimate cause; a discernment which, in the highest matters, is one of apprehension rather than comprehension. Having achieved this, the liberal mind rests in contemplative admiration. Not so the utilitarian mind which would be busy with plans to harness the powers of the First Cause!

The man of liberality pays observance, respect; he is at home in the presence of greatness, one of the complement of that kingdom; he seeks to imitate God by being a worthy servant, returning to God the gifts God has given him, tenfold. The 'admiration' of the man of utility is predatory in the company of predators. (As Plato observes, the joy of heaven is good company, the pain of hell is bad company).

In contemplative observance of the Deity, we reach our ultimate actuality, an actuality beyond the eudaimonia of this world, the actuality of makariotes, blessedness. In the progress from wonder to observance, from irascibility to still actuality, happiness comes as a gift; it is not the object of our quest, which is the quest for knowing. We do not offer observance to God because it makes us happy; we are made happy in offering observance. Aristotle's priorities are right; his detractors have misrepresented his argument.

9. Does Aristotle view our discernment of the Deity as something like the discovery of a gold mine, as some critics represent?

The situation is quite otherwise. The drive of intrinsic finality towards our natural end is, in man, a rational drive, but to start with is unfor-
mulated. On reflection we recognize that our natural end is the the vision of God; thenceforth the divine life becomes our conscious model. Since the archetype was there, and at work, all the time, awaiting our explicit recognition, the examined life leads, not to a novel discovery, but to a definition of what previously was but diffusely apprehended. The definition does not necessarily give more profundity to life, but it enables us better to discipline our energies, and guards against mistaken courses (other than those of an errant will). Thus Aristotle in *Nic. Eth.* I, 2: ‘Will not then a knowledge of this Supreme Good be also of great practical importance for the conduct of life? Will it not better enable us to attain what is fitting, like archers having a target to aim at?’

It is not the Deity, but philosophy, which is the novel and as it were accidental discovery. Hence the critics have not only misread Aristotle, they have misunderstood the character of philosophy.

The situation in politics is analogous to that in divinity. The polis is not a useful discovery, a tour de force, a human contrivance (as the sophists would have it); it is the archetype, our natural end in the temporal order, inviting recognition, delineation, and tendance by the leisured mind: all of which Aristotle expresses in the dictum that the polis is ‘by nature’. Our itinerary to God is similarly by nature.

10. To the foregoing defence of Aristotle a further objection might be voiced. Does not Aristotle deny that we can love God? Must not then our approach to the Deity be craven or mercenary?

When however we examine what Aristotle says about our tendance of God, it appears that Aristotle’s thought is on a line quite other than that assumed by the objection. Aristotle deplores facile talk of praise of God or love of God. Such talk treats of God as if He were some superior man. Aristotle enjoins that our tendance of God should be referred to a higher plane as befits the dignity and otherness of its august object; a plane in which we negate merely human modes in order to make way for tendance in more eminent modes. Such is in accord with the principle already referred to: the Aristotelian sense of apophatic theology which guards discourse on God from degenerating into anthropomorphisms. Aristotle’s denial of popular moral attributes to God proceeds under a similar inspiration (*Nic. Eth.* X, 8).

In *Nic. Eth.* I, 12 he points out that we praise good men, but we honour God. Again (*Nic. Eth.* VIII, 12), he remarks that the friendship between radical unequals, as children and parents, is of a different kind from that between equals; and where disparity in rank between men is very great, ordinary friendship becomes impossible; this reaching its ultimate in the case of man and God (*Nic. Eth.* VIII, 7).

While the parent-child relation is not be to equated with common friend-
ship or love, it is not less than this, but more; it is deeper than friendship, unterminating until death, unrequitable, and inexhaustible. All the more so as regards man and God.

Further than calling man’s tendance of God admiration or honour, Aristotle has no word for this love which is beyond love by human standards. (Only with the divine synkatabasis of the Judaeo-Christian dispensation did man’s love for God become more assimilable and receive a name—agape). Plato is happy to talk of our love of God. But this is one of the several points at which Aristotle has suspicions of Plato, that he sometimes demeaned the divine by his pretensions to familiarity. Aristotle, more conscious of the infinite majesty of God, exercises restraint in his language about divine things.

11. To sum up: It seems endemic to the fallen human race to pervert religion by the inversion of right order. Thereby men think to approach God in order to live well, to follow the devices and desires of their own hearts with more success. A course which, in Plato’s judgment, belongs to the ultimate immoralism. He devoted the Republic to the exposure of this civitas terrena in its true colours. Aristotle’s writings, both metaphysical and ethical, witness that the Stagirite’s mind on the subject is the same in substance as Plato’s.

The charge that Aristotle’s ethics are but a system of highminded self-regard fails when his writings are fairly examined. In some cases the charge proceeds in an a priori manner from what is (erroneously) thought to be the tenets of Aristotle’s theology. We have cited Little among the accusers; he is a patent a priorist. The case of Gauthier (whom we have not cited) is singular. Unsurpassed in his scholarly knowledge of the Ethics, yet he is so dominated by the theological a priori that he explains away contrary passages in the Ethics, or if that is not feasible allows them as disconformities. Gauthier’s elusions are so transparent that they detract scarcely at all from the great Commentary on the Ethics to which all scholars are deeply indebted. Maritain is a different case. He is no a priorist. But he reads Aristotle as one who has no ear for music. Unlike St. Thomas, he fails to catch the theme.

St. Thomas, with his sensitive appraisal of Aristotle, his benign comprehensiveness, found no obstacle to a candid recognition of the worth of the Ethics. The modern dissent, when critically examined, leaves St. Thomas’s judgment unscathed; the Stagirite’s reputation as a moralist emerges with even greater lustre.