

WISDOM INTO KNOWLEDGE¹

OUR Western civilization can legitimately reflect that it has bestowed on the rest of mankind one or two valuable treasures in the domain of the things of the spirit. One such treasure is the unspoiled instinct for speculative truth. Greek philosophy, and Aristotle, first enabled us to realize the absolute value of wholehearted detachment from affective inclinations, and of chaste, severe, pure science, whose only function and purpose is the discernment of that which *is*—vision. Later the West was to know that the Word of God came into the world to the end that He might bear witness to the truth, to know too that eternal life is eternal vision; further, it came to be moulded by scholastic discipline and the stern claims of intellect: hence it is quite natural that it should have so long retained, in its concept of knowledge, an appreciation of the dignity of speculative truth.

Now the modern world is fast losing such an appreciation in every domain of knowledge save in the one wherein it really excelled—I mean in the science of phenomena. At the age of the Renaissance a very general propensity of heart towards earthly goods conditioned the widespread success of the new scientific methods, and, with it, the preference given to Science rather than Wisdom. Note too that science, though capable of provoking many a cupidity in man, itself remained immune from the tarnish of appetitive elements. Science has been for the modern world the last stronghold of the sacredness of truth and of spiritual values—ineffacious spiritual values, because the spirituality concerned is not *wisdom* spirituality and because in the practical order it can be turned to evil as well as to good uses; and that is why present-day rationalism knows so much of melancholia. Still, it *is* spirituality, at least incipient spirituality, and so de-

¹ M. Maritain has kindly permitted the translation of the following passage which forms part of his latest book, *Science et Sagesse*, about to be published. A review article of this important work will appear in a subsequent issue of BLACKFRIARS. [ED.]

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serving of our esteem; for though in it the notion of truth is considerably impaired, and the tendency to side-track into the practical order most pronounced, yet I maintain that in science (whether of physical phenomena or mathematical physics) there is to be found a naturally sacred dignity and virtue which arise from the fact that it is, in spite of everything to the contrary, intrinsically ordained to speculative truth—which last is in itself independent of any human element or “biological” preoccupation.

Nevertheless, this untarnished chastity of knowledge is more truly characteristic of wisdom rather than of the other branches of knowledge. Metaphysics is more perfectly speculative than philosophy of nature and the various sciences of phenomena. And though higher forms of wisdom (theology and mystical contemplation), because they are higher, are both speculative and practical, yet they are primarily and principally speculative. By dint of gazing upon subsistent Life and Love they are able to peer into the innermost aspects of human life and human interests; they are practical too, because in the light of uncreated Reality’s self-manifestation, it is human action that becomes manifest—human action whose due term is beyond time, attained only by the vision of God, and whose guiding principles are divine. The ancients were at pains to point out that mystical contemplation is, properly speaking, a form of knowledge, a *science*, and the highest science, though obscure in its mode.

It was left to the intellectual pauperism of our own days to reproach Greek and mediæval thought for this pure idea of science and of that intellectuality which is one of the title-deeds of our Western heritage, and to devise a wisdom that amounts only to negation and annihilation of speculative values. Pragmatism has been, in this respect, a particularly noisome phenomenon for Western civilization. As a philosophical doctrine its life was but ephemeral; but the day has already dawned on certain conceptions that are even more degrading for the mind and which amount to sheer materialism realized in the very exercise of thought. For there is an imminent danger of the fall even of the last “stronghold”

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of spirituality which the science of phenomena offered to the modern world. Whenever "society" (as a category) and whenever mysticisms of party or state are set up as absolutes, then even science and philosophy are in danger of being dominated by a kind of collective human dynamism, be it of class, race or nation.

Need we add that pragmatism, as a *subconscious disposition or tendency*, has not ceased to impress itself upon our culture, even in its higher spheres?

Why, for instance, in the neo-protestantism of a Karl Barth, do we find this contempt for the speculative (or what is taken for the speculative), were it not for a belief that speculative knowledge is itself defined as something relative to action, as refusal of action, refusal to commit oneself, failure to face the drama of existence and destiny, withdrawal into a sort of academic jury-box? Speculative knowledge may put on such a guise when misused by mere onlookers of the drama of life, duped into thinking that lack of the human touch means greatness, whose use of speculative knowledge is a mere contradiction frustrating its own object—even in the realms of action and conflict, they are enmeshed in possibilities and can only freeze all action into stillness and nod their heads knowingly at those who bear the brunt of battle. Now speculative knowledge is really something absolutely different; it relates to a certain generous-mindedness that responds to the richness of being and lives with the life of time-transcending truth; and, because of this, it is most intimately bound up with the existence of a being who lives not by bread alone and who in his very essence craves for the "un-useful"; it is a help, a guide and a light for free-will's commitments and choices which are as so many seeds sown in time.

Again, why is it that so many Catholics (especially in clerical circles or among those whose profession it is to impart knowledge) are in their heart of hearts distrustful of the wisdom, the fine flower of which is offered them by their own Angelic Doctor? This distrust is not born of any contrary convictions in philosophy or theology, convictions which would be the fruit of serious, mature study, and of

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meditation, and which would consequently earn for themselves due respect; rather is it the outcome of an antecedent refusal, a sub-rational prejudice against wisdom as such and speculative knowledge. In the world-scheme of these materializing minds there can be no place for anything that does not immediately and tangibly bear fruit in action; henceforth, for them, that Wisdom which is above time and whose principles were of old formulated by a Doctor of the Church, must necessarily be as inoperative as a dead man's arm.

In attempting to analyze the slow historical trend which has brought us to our present-day disorder (and promises), I think that we should recognize its twofold character and in its causes distinguish two very different stresses.

First, there is man, who forgets that in the order of good the initiative is always primarily God's, and that the condescending infusion of God's fulness into us is antecedent to our own upward progress; for man has sought to reverse the rôles and let himself take the initiative in his effort towards good; and so his upward movement had to be *apart* from the work of grace, and that is why the age we speak of has been dualistic, torn apart and impoverished, an age of humanism that is at once man-centred and sundered from the Incarnation, wherein Science had in the end to take precedence of Wisdom and efforts at progress had to turn to the destruction of human values.

But, on the other hand, a kind of divine exigency was also at work in the same historical period . . . throughout it all we can say that what was afoot was the creature's rehabilitation and a growingly effectual realization and discovery of the true dignity of that which is veiled in the mystery of a human being. Pascal's saying was: "Man's heart is hollow, full of uncleanness"—but this hollowness is so abysmal that a sounding of its depths must reveal God Himself or death. In a word, man-centred humanism is radically vitiated, not because it is humanism but because man-centred.

Hence it is not enough to say that the Christian world of the Middle Ages was crossed and re-crossed by a twofold movement, downwards and upwards, of God to man and of

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man to God; for this twofold movement which follows from and manifests the Incarnation is essential to *every* Christian age, and we know that under the Church's tutelage the world can have several Christian ages. Further, we should attempt to determine the characteristic note of mediæval Christianity. Quite briefly, its distinguishing characteristic, as I see it, is the simple, spontaneous, unreflecting response of man in answer to God's outpouring.

It was a simple *upward* movement—allowing for violent retrograde movements of passion and crime—a movement of the intelligence towards its object, of the soul towards perfection, and of the whole world towards a social and juridical structure made one by the Kingship of Christ; Christendom in those days had the sweeping ambition, the spontaneous courage of childhood, and was building up a mighty stronghold upon whose summit God would take up His abode; because of its love for God, it was preparing to enthrone Him on earth. Thus it was that all human elements were under the tutelage of the divine, ordained to and protected by it, at least so long as love was their mainspring. Losses, disasters meant nothing, for a divine work was being wrought by souls regenerate. Man's soul was pierced by the sword, but in this was the creature magnified, forgetting self to remember God.

But when the heroic impulse that bore him on ceased, and man fell back on himself, then it was that he felt crushed by the heavy structure of the world of his own building, the horror, too, of experiencing his own nothingness. A creature submits to being "despised"—i.e. set at naught—by saints; it knows that theirs is a just judgment. But it cannot brook being "despised"—i.e. misconstrued as regards the innate elements that are from God Himself—by the ordinary run of men, be they theologians or philosophers or Churchmen or Statesmen. The Renaissance saw the creature raise to heaven the song of its greatness and beauty; the Reformation its distress and wretchedness. All through, whether in a mood of plaint or of revolt, the creature pleads for its rehabilitation: and what is this but to claim as its due the right to be loved?

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Now could God, Whose love infuses and creates goodness in things, could God make the creature without making it worthy of being loved (I do not say preferred . . .)? Such a plea, envisaged thus quite formally, was consonant with the laws of historical development. Science sought the conquest of created nature, the human soul fashioned a universe of its own subjectivity, the profane world acquired its own differentiating laws, the creature came to know itself—and yet we have seen the price paid for all this, and how the outcome was catastrophe of the sort wherein ends all true tragedy, all because humanity only took up again and continued the upward movement that obtained before the fourteenth century by arrogating to itself henceforth the entire initiative; thus have the humanist hero and the puritan convinced of his own salvation brought us to a perfectly logical undoing.

These reflexions help us to understand how it was quite in keeping with the characteristic note of mediæval Christianity for this cultural period to be one of theology at its zenith, distinct and supreme; whereas the modern world was to see the birth and growth of *disjoined* speculative and moral philosophy.

The modern world has ceased to be modern. If a new Christian civilization, free or fettered, is in the making, it too will have to know in its own way the mysterious rhythm of the heart-beats which are its very life. The second movement must once again be second, and the first initiative must be restored to the divine goodness, but without thereby dissipating all that the preceding age knew and acquired and yet was unable to retain in the cleavage.

There is but one issue for the world's history (I speak of a Christian régime, come what may of the rest): true reverence for the creature precisely because it is united with God and because it owes all to Him: humanism, yes, but God-centred and integral, the humanism of the Incarnation. More may be said of such a movement in Christianity, here it is enough to point out that the present movement is most eminently propitious for the emergence and growth to full stature of an authentically Christian philosophy.

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I speak of "Christian philosophy," and can hardly help doing so; but it is with reluctance, for there comes a moment when all words seem treacherous, and there is a danger that this phrase may conjure up—in biassed minds (and we are all biassed)—visions of a philosophy bastardized and attenuated by Christianity, or perhaps visions of philosophy's enrolment in some pious confraternity or devout association. Nevertheless, Pope Leo XIII used it in his great encyclical on St. Thomas Aquinas; furthermore, if we understand it for what it means and no more, its significance is extremely exact: it stands not for some sort of attenuated and subservient philosophy, but for a free philosophy, for philosophy proper, set in the atmosphere of explicit faith and baptismal grace.

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(Translated by Roland D. Potter, O.P.)