

A NEW DEAL FROM ST. THOMAS

ONCE it was a sign of taste to knock down the little grecian temple at the end of the glade and build a gothic ruin in its place. Does it not seem that the contemporary revival of St. Thomas is sometimes conducted in the same spirit? And does not this to some extent justify the mutters about philosophical feudalism? At any rate such reflections have produced a most candid and enquiring essay, an examination of conscience as to why our philosophy should be either accepted or rejected more or less as a vogue.¹

In his own university the author discovers a feeling against St. Thomas out of all proportion to the effort of revival. He does not permit himself to suppose that the reaction comes from a fresh reading of the text. The fault is largely ours. We have presented our philosophy almost as a religious creed, not indeed by appealing outright to ecclesiastical authority, but by sundry becks and nods hinting, and not too gently, that we have bread where all else is synthetic confectionery; playing on the verbal emotions; using the psychological magic of security, a conservative code, the few simple tests. Rationalism, like racialism, can have its superstitions, and both can offer violence to the free individual, sensing only the forces of disintegration outside their own particular pattern. In both cases, too, it is the Jew who suffers, the wandering Jew; the mind unhappy, ironic, searching, but still unattached. We have avoided the issue with modern thought, or begged the question, bringing forward half a dozen or so of our own principles tricked out with technicalities. We claimed to be after philosophy in all its perennial and universal vitality, but we called it Thomism,² or Scholasticism worse still, making it a

¹ *Saint Thomas and the Gentiles*. The Aquinas Lecture 1938. Under the Auspices of the Aristotelian Society of Marquette University. By Mortimer J. Adler. Associate Professor of the Philosophy of Law, University of Chicago. (Milwaukee; Marquette University Press. Pp. III. n.p.)

² How Fr. Bede Jarrett used to regret the word whenever as editor of *BLACKFRIARS* he had to pass it—which happened not rarely. Dr. Adler would have us renounce the name Thomist if to our contemporaries it suggests adherence to a philosophical sect. Or at least we can spell it without the capital letter.

system and an affair for particular cultural, temperamental, even political affiliations. Though professing that evidence from human authority holds the lowest place, we have sought to impose the philosophy of St. Thomas for all sorts of reasons that were less than philosophical, not least from the fear of the complicated scientisms of industrial democracy. Had we the power, we would flatten out the variety of a technique we only half-understood, calling it perversity and sophistication. Small wonder that we are suspected of philosophical nazism. With this paragraph we can now finish laying it on thick.³

It should be taken as a doubtful compliment when St. Thomas is praised for having created an almost perfect medieval system. For that implies something closed, a finished culture, not the achievement of philosophical truth, permanent in its substance, yet developing with all the changes of a universe in process; exhibiting the unity and the diversity of the analogical being which is its object; as much the same and as different as the Catholicism of the solitary in the desert and of the busy pastor who successfully runs a perpetual novena that spans the States with its bulletins and broadcasts.

We must recapture the spirit of assimilation, more conspicuous in the *Summa contra Gentes* than in the *Summa Theologica*. Working from the latter may easily mean that we are doing no more than elaborate our own tradition. The outsider admires, but is unconvinced. Afterwards it may be re-started in forms appropriate to our age, but our immediate obligation is repeat the effort of the *Summa contra Gentes*. Dr. Adler draws an analogy between the pagans, Jews, and heretics to whom St. Thomas was there addressing himself and the three classes of thinkers with whom we must communicate. The likeness may seem far fetched, but Dr. Adler's imagination does not exceed the bounds of caution. Were we to follow his strategical sense then it is

³ Dr. Adler, perhaps justly, once or twice allows himself a medievalist's flick at modern thought. And, on a light note of criticism, may be noticed his momentary confusion between *a posteriori* and inductive (p. 18), and between sense phenomena and accidents (p. 84).

possible that the present period of trench warfare might end and we might break through into modern thought on the three fronts of critique of science, philosophy pure, and philosophy of religion.

* * * *

A still common assumption is that our only scientific knowledge about things in general is through the processes of empirical science. First settle the facts, then formulate the laws, finally rationalize them in a theory.⁴ Modern criticism of science has done something to unsettle confidence in scientific rationalism, but the effect has been rather to have recourse to a mysticism of values than to attempt to establish a higher science. Philosophy has either been taken as speculation about unanswerable questions or as a guess at things that will presently be submitted to experimental verification. Even when it has been treated with greater consideration, it has been assumed that it is dependent on the findings of experimental science and is consequently in constant need of radical revision.

St. Thomas could share with his pagans at least a common acceptance of the validity of philosophical processes, but our positivist can retort that we are begging the question if we argue for the independence of philosophy for philosophical reasons. For that is just the point, is there such a reality as a purely philosophical reason? Nor is it much use rumbling at him about the laws of being.

Fortunately a scientist is not a sceptic by inclination, and it is possible to make him explicitly conscious of philosophy if he is prepared to argue seriously. He can be shown that all his processes are charged with philosophical significations, that every one of his affirmations reposes on a necessity and meanings beyond the power of his science to demonstrate. He must not be rushed, for he is rightly suspicious of philosophers, and there are thomists among them, who practice a kind of spider-philosophy; science may

⁴ The method is really not so straightforward as that, for the relations of fact, law, hypothesis are much more criss-cross and really modify one another.

provide the twigs, but the stuff that really matters can be spun out of a few indemonstrable metaphysical principles. They forget the flies.

There is first the negative course proposed by St. Thomas. The anti-philosophical arguments must be shown to be unconvincing in the very medium in which they move. It is no use demonstrating against them from our own principles; it is like shooting at torpedoes with anti-aircraft guns. You may score a hit. All the technical innovations of the logical positivists, to take one instance, must be mastered, in order to state them as fully and fairly as St. Thomas does the objections of his opponents in the *Contra Gentes*.

There is then the positive course, of accepting part of the positivist's position and then showing that he is there a philosopher, perhaps even despite himself. The most modest scientific effort works against a background supposed to be real, at least in the sense that it is somehow independent of the investigation that is being conducted. In science at all times, whether it is using rhetorical or mathematical logic, whether it is discoursing in terms of humours or hormones, of reliable atoms or inconstant waves, there are implicit such concepts as relation, modes of being, the distinction between the knower and the known, between the true and the false, or at least between the better and the not so good. In his propositions the scientist should recognize necessary assumptions, but he should welcome the attempt to show that they are not assumptions when carried to their ultimate grounds.

Patient examination will show a subject that is not the creature of empirical science or logistics; a philosophy of nature will emerge able to bear the strictest tests a positivist may require, a scientific knowledge about things that can be sufficiently verified without reference to the changing content of empirical science, and that without appealing to the verbalisms he suspects. Both scientist and philosopher may presently be found to be talking metaphysics almost without knowing it. A language is better learnt from conversation than from grammar; so should the philosopher,

and the caution applies peculiarly to a thomist, draw less from the phrase-book handed down to him and bend himself to the common terms of the discussion so as to render them more ultimately intelligible than the scientist had supposed.

* * * *

Having arrived at philosophy, the next, and perhaps less difficult step, is to address ourselves to the thinkers who hold that there are many philosophies, all of them valuable in relation to the circumstances that have produced them. They consider philosophy after the fashion of a mathematical system; diverse systems will be generated by the choice of different initial postulates, these being determined by the kind of system one wishes to develop, and this being determined by the psychological needs of an individual or period. Philosophy becomes a mixture of history, of philosophy and autobiography. The truth of any system is measured partly by its usefulness, partly by the inner coherence of all its propositions; the law of contradiction may control development, applying within systems, but not between systems. Such a state of mind is easily arrived at when philosophical studies become very learned and the approach is all sympathetic and psychological.

Nevertheless the philosophic temper will not be disposed to agree that philosophy so closely copies the processes and purposes of a departmental science; it aims to achieve a knowledge that amounts to a comprehensive reason, not enumeration, of the real world, and on this account the philosopher cannot be easy in mind with two or more fundamentally rival systems. They may differ grammatically like languages, or rhetorically like speeches saying substantially the same thing. But by the rules of thought logically contradictory propositions cannot be simultaneously admitted. Since the truth or falsity of conclusions reflects back on premises, it would appear then that the method of making postulates in philosophy is improper.

Dr. Adler makes the suggestion, and we must consider it briefly, that St. Thomas constructs no system on the

mathematical model, because his method is much more like that of the empirical sciences. Facts lie on his threshold, as they do with the scientist; but whereas the latter proceeds to mill them with his machinery for his special purposes, the philosopher is concerned in the first place to assimilate them into the general world of being. It makes a world of difference to the scientist if he thinks they are bags of grain when in reality they are bags of grit; but not so much to the philosopher, at least in the beginning. All is grist that comes to the mill. This is not to affect a metaphysical nonchalance towards the preoccupations of science—which would be an example of St. Paul's *scientia inflat*, windbag metaphysics—but merely to indicate that the fundamentals of philosophy do not repose on the answer to such questions as whether the bags contain grain or grit, or whether they lie at the door three yards away, or whether in truth they are only lying three psychological processes away at the threshold of my consciousness. These questions are important, but metaphysics is well away before they are even started.

With this assertion of independence, not as regards some underlying processes in reality, but as regards the changing and approximately determined registrations of empirical science, and the even more approximate statements of a rough and ready commonsense, must go a certain spirit of diffidence. If he is content with his original generalities, the metaphysician will presently be gnawing at his own vitals, perhaps not even that. First principles are not so much food for thought as thought for food. In the first place, it can be admitted for the moment that they are tautologies. The admission of itself makes plain that we do not start with a postulate, for there is no need to assume a tautology. First principles, however, of themselves do not implicitly contain all subsequent philosophical development; as if by staring at them we may presently evolve the explanation of the universe. All the same, they may not be dismissed as verbalisms, for all other judgements must be referred back to them; they are genuinely knowledge, since they express a

relation of necessity and advance a step in explication. Even in ordinary speech we end a long enquiry by saying, that's all very well, but then Susan is Susan you see.

Dr. Adler then goes on to suggest that St. Thomas's thought, far from having the perfection of linear inference, is essentially circular in its movement, an ever widening series of concentric circles, which is not deduction in the mathematical sense, but enlightenment in the philosophical sense. This is especially noticeable in the *Summa Theologica*, where many positions employed in earlier questions have to wait later for their own truth to be made clear. The very question of the existence of God is not completely resolved until well after the *quinque viae*. As science avoids the vicious circle by considering its advances as a spiral movement, so philosophy itself should not be accused of disorderly logic if it transcends the process of moving from point to point.⁵

* * * *

As both tautology and circularity may be considered as signs that philosophical reasoning more nearly approaches simple intellection in its mode of knowing, so also may antinomy, the recognition that there are mysteries all round the philosophical clearing we make. Pure philosophy must be content to leave certain paradoxes positively unresolved, neither concealing them nor denying them by an exclusive emphasis on one extreme. It does not follow that one system is as good as another because all of them sooner or later end in antinomies. Sooner or later; that makes all the difference between getting involved in a contradiction due to insufficient or defective argument and reaching the essential limits of human reasoning. Nor does an antinomy invalidate the analysis from which it starts as if it were a proposition following from premises in linear inference. For if

⁵ Dr. Adler considers that in the *Topics* Aristotle comes nearer to explaining the biological manner of development employed by the philosopher than he does in the *Posterior Analytics*, which more suggest the mathematical notion of system and deductive development.

BLACKFRIARS

it be admitted that philosophy starts from an object that can be only incompletely articulated by reasoning, then it is not surprising that the analysis should reach an antinomy when carried to its limit. Here is suggested the need of a superior wisdom, a descending supernatural theology, and here perhaps we find St. Thomas most easily workable.

Yet first it seems for our modern world we must address ourselves to establishing a scientific philosophy higher than the empirical science and to salvaging philosophy itself from the philosophies. "It is easier to praise St. Thomas," observes Dr. Adler, "than to imitate him." He has done both.

THOMAS GILBY, O.P.

MARITAIN on VANN

BLACKFRIARS is privileged to announce for forthcoming publication in its pages a special paper by Monsieur Jacques Maritain on Father Gerald Vann's much discussed book, Morals makyth Man.

Readers will also look forward to an important presentation of the principles of Christian Humanism by Père Thomas Deman, O.P., Professor of theoretical Morals of the French Dominican Province, and to a penetrating study of the significance of the American Catholic Worker movement from the pen of Father H. A. Reinhold.