

AN INTRODUCTION
TO
PHILOSOPHY

THE PERENNIAL PRINCIPLES
OF THE CLASSICAL REALIST TRADITION

By

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subject matter, the knowledge of God in His inmost nature, His inmost life, is higher than the subject matter of philosophy.

But some of the truths given to us through revelation are also known to us by reason. The fields of philosophy and theology, in other words, overlap. It is important, therefore, to define their boundaries and determine their relation to each other. To secure this final element in our definition we must turn aside temporarily and examine more closely the relations between revelation and reason.

REASON AND REVELATION

Historically the efforts to reconcile the valid claims of both reason and revelation have run all the way from the denial of reason in favor of revelation to the deification of reason and the denial of the very possibility of revelation. Along the lines of the first extreme, some theologians have held that God's revelation has disclosed all the things that are really important for man to know, and that the search for further knowledge is dangerous and illusory. Tertullian, a second century writer, sets the type. St. Bernard and St. Peter Damian in the twelfth century, and the Franciscan Spirituals at the end of the Middle Ages to some extent reflect the type.¹¹ St. Paul is their favorite authority: "See to it that no one deceives you by philosophy and vain deceit, according to human traditions, according to the elements of the world and not according to Christ" (Col. 2:8).¹² Misguided zealots like Tertullian who defend revelation by destroying reason are fortunately rare and we need not spend time on them.

1. "Faith Seeking Understanding"

A considerable distance from this uncompromising fideism, but still frequently blurring the lines between faith and reason is that

¹¹ See E. Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1938), Chap. 1.

¹² Needless to say, this is a one-sided interpretation of St. Paul who also tells us that "the invisible things [of God] are clearly seen . . . being understood through the things that are made" (Rom. 1:20); a text that has been rightly interpreted as the divine charter for natural theology (and therefore for philosophy).

strong tradition which, basing itself on St. Augustine, holds that faith is the indispensable condition of understanding. For St. Augustine — his own intellectual and moral history so taught him — natural reason by itself is hopelessly inadequate to the pursuit of ultimate truth. Faith paves the way for reason by disciplining the soul and spiritualizing the intellect. Since the intellect is led by love, the role of the will in knowing is primary. Christian wisdom, in short, implies right desire as well as true insight.

The prolific family of St. Augustine — it extends from St. Anselm and St. Bonaventure through Malebranche and Pascal right down to Kierkegaard and Newman — stresses, thus, the importance of docility, with reason drawing its sustenance from faith: "Whence shall I begin? With authority, or with reason? The natural order is that authority should precede reason when we wish to learn anything," St. Augustine says.¹³ And again, "If you cannot understand, believe in order that you may understand."¹⁴

The Christian wisdom of St. Augustine showed in time an unfortunate tendency among some of his lesser disciples to degenerate into a kind of Christian theologism, and "faith seeking understanding" only too often meant the reduction of theology to philosophy, with a proliferation by mediocre philosophers of bad reasons for what they believed.

2. The Sundering of Faith and Reason

At the opposite pole to the fideist is the extreme rationalist, who holds that human reason is ultimate and rejects the very possibility of revelation. (The term "naturalism" is sometimes given to this position.) The rationalist in effect deifies reason, since he refuses to admit the possibility of anything higher — of God, for example. Instead of submitting his intellect to truth, he declares that he is the arbiter and measure of truth.

A less extreme version of rationalism is that of philosophers like Descartes who believe in the fact of revelation but hold that noth-

¹³ *De moribus Ecclesiae*, I, 2, 3.

¹⁴ *Sermon* 118. This and the preceding text are quoted in Father D'Arcy's article on "The Philosophy of St. Augustine," in *A Monument to St. Augustine* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1930), p. 159.

ing revealed can be understood; the gap between reason and faith is so great that they cannot be related to one another. Thus, for philosophers like Descartes and his followers, the mind gives a blind assent to the data of revelation and the intellect goes about its business of philosophizing in complete indifference to theology.

These positions must be further distinguished from the position of those who, lacking the gift of faith in a divine revelation, concede nevertheless that such a revelation is possible and not inconsistent with reason. For such persons, though, reason is in fact the last court of appeal, the only wisdom open to man.

3. The Harmony of Faith and Reason

The concord of faith and reason, with the careful safeguarding of the nature and rights of each, was not achieved until the time of St. Thomas, who opposed equally those who introduced philosophy into theology and those who tried to reduce theology to philosophy.¹⁵ St. Thomas first carefully distinguished between theology and philosophy so that the nature of one could not be confused with the other.

It is the nature of philosophy to proceed solely by way of rational evidence and demonstration based on such evidence; therefore we should never appeal to revelation in support of a philosophical thesis. It is the nature of theology to base itself on the word of God, drawing out the implications of revealed truth in the light of faith; although it may use philosophy as an instrument, it cannot be reduced to philosophy.

Within theology itself St. Thomas distinguished between truths which, though revealed, can also be known by the unaided intellect, such as the existence and unity of God, and revealed truths which are beyond reason, such as the Trinity and the Incarnation.¹⁶ Even though reason can discover truths of the first kind, they are nevertheless revealed because they are essential for man to know and unaided reason can attain them only with diffi-

¹⁵ The essential elements of the solution worked out by St. Thomas had been laid down long before him, and especially by the twelfth-century Jewish philosopher, Moses Maimonides. It remains true, however, that St. Thomas was the first to bring together and synthesize those elements into an orderly solution.

¹⁶ See *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, 3.

culty and at the constant risk of error. Once understood, however, they are known and not believed; that is, they are held as philosophy, and not on faith. The second class of truth, secrets of God's inner being which are of their very nature forever inaccessible to reason, will never be held other than as faith, for "what belongs to faith cannot be proved demonstratively."¹⁷

Having thus distinguished between believing and knowing, between faith and reason, St. Thomas is careful to make the point that although they are distinct they are not separate: "The gifts of grace are added to nature in such a manner that they do not remove but perfect it. So it is with the light of faith that is infused in us gratuitously: it does not destroy the light of natural knowledge with which we are by nature endowed."

A truth in one order cannot contradict a truth in another order. A truth in philosophy cannot contradict a truth of faith: "Now although the natural light of the human mind does not suffice for the manifestation of the things that are made manifest by faith, yet it is impossible that what is divinely taught to us by faith be contrary to the things with which we are endowed by nature. For one or the other would then have to be false, and since both come to us from God, God would be to us an author of falsehood, which is impossible."

Because a truth of the natural order cannot possibly contradict a truth of the revealed order, the philosopher or scientist is free to investigate nature as far as his researches can carry him, in the full confidence that he cannot discover any truth that will contradict revelation.¹⁸

¹⁷ This and the following texts in this section are taken from *In Boeth. de Trin.*, III, 1, ad 3. Quoted by A. C. Pegis, in the Introduction to *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith (Summa Contra Gentiles)* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1955), Vol. I, pp. 24-26.

¹⁸ See the following on this point: "The position of Aquinas may be considered a healthy one in that it assures the rational investigator, the philosopher or the scientist, that he need not fear to pursue his independent studies. Nothing he can firmly establish can possibly be counter to true religion. Some historians have thought that this attitude of Aquinas has helped to free European thought from the fear of undermining religion and so has helped to make possible the independent pursuit of natural science." Stallknecht and Brumbaugh, *Spirit of Western Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1950), p. 206.

On the other hand, theology exercises a kind of negative jurisdiction over philosophy and the empirical sciences, in the sense that where there is an apparent contradiction between reason and faith, the theologian claims the right, in view of the infinitely more sure source of his truth, to tell the philosopher or the scientist that he has erred somewhere and must go over his reasons again. "For if in what the philosophers have said we come upon something that is contrary to faith, this does not belong to philosophy but is rather an abuse of philosophy arising from a defect in reason."

To sum up: Wisdom is knowledge about the ultimate reality, the unchanging being of God Himself, but is realized according to different lights: philosophical wisdom according to the natural light of reason; theological wisdom according to the light of faith. The two wisdoms, though related, are distinct, and to confuse one with the other is to destroy it. *Philosophy therefore seeks its goal by the natural light of reason alone.*

THE DEFINITION OF PHILOSOPHY

We now have all the elements necessary for us to define philosophy in its strict sense. First, we have seen that it differs from the everyday knowledge of common sense in that it is scientific knowledge of things through their causes. Second, since philosophy studies being itself it shares with common sense an interest in the whole of reality as against the parceling out of reality which is characteristic of the natural sciences. Our third point is that philosophy differs from the physical sciences not only in terms of the greater universality of its subject matter, but also in terms of its approach to its subject matter: whereas the physical sciences concern themselves with proximate or secondary causes, philosophy deals with first or ultimate causes. Finally, philosophy differs from revealed theology in that it uses reason alone to reach its answers, whereas the light of theology is the light of faith.

Our definition of philosophy epitomizes all these elements: *Philosophy is the knowledge of all things in their first principles or causes as seen by the natural light of reason.*

This definition of philosophy has grown out of the gradual differ-

entiation in time of the various orders of knowledge. This differentiation unfortunately was not achieved without violence and difficulty, each order of knowledge — theology, philosophy, mathematics, the empirical sciences — all tyrannically claiming at one time or another to be the sole interpreter of reality.

The truth is that the full knowledge of anything comprises all that can be discovered about it on all the levels of investigation — scientific, mathematical, and philosophic; and the man of religious faith will further integrate this knowledge with what revelation tells him in those areas where philosophy opens onto theology. We separate out the various aspects of a thing for detailed study, but only in order to make a final integration which will restore all those separate facets of the thing into a unified whole. In brief, we "distinguish in order to unite."¹⁹

CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY

Considered in its essence according as we have just defined it, philosophy to the extent that its nature is fully realized must be the same for all men at all times and all places. In this strict sense there cannot be a Christian philosophy any more than there can be a Christian mathematics or a Christian grammar, for philosophy as such, in its pure nature, is the work of reason alone — "the perfect work of reason," St. Thomas calls it.²⁰

But the definition of philosophy is an abstract essence, and abstractions are not found except in a mind. Philosophy is in fact formulated by living men who are part of an age and environment which they cannot help but reflect — if only in their choice of problems — in their philosophizing. It is in this context, the *state* of philosophy, the concrete conditions under which it is realized, as contrasted with the bare essence or nature of philosophy, such as we have expressed it in our definition, that it becomes possible to speak of Christian philosophy (or of Indian philosophy, or of Marxist philosophy). Thus with reference to the Middle Ages we can quite properly speak of a Christian philosophy as

¹⁹ For the interrelationship of the different levels of knowledge and the divisions of philosophy, see Charts on p. 260.

²⁰ *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 45, 2.

contrasted with Arabian or Jewish philosophy; or, in the case of modern philosophy we can speak of English philosophy as against the philosophy of the Continent.

In a period such as the European Middle Ages when the Christian religion predominated, it was inevitable that the dominant theological preoccupations of the time should be reflected in philosophy. This relationship could be a harmful one, as when, for example, theology attempted to swallow up philosophy, but in general the interchange between philosophy and theology which gives Christian philosophy its distinctive character has been a fruitful one for philosophy. Under the stimulus of theology, philosophy has investigated areas of reality which might otherwise have lain fallow forever. In the endeavor to explain the data of revelation, philosophers have explored and deepened such key concepts as those of nature, personality, freedom. There has even been a more positive contribution in the actual disclosure to philosophy of truths hitherto ignored or but dimly perceived; the definition of God as being, for example, comes from the Scriptures; the distinction between nature and person is another such gift of theology to philosophy.²¹ Negatively, the external control of theology over philosophy has helped to keep it from error.

Besides the work of enlightening and fertilizing the human reason, the Christian sees in theology the further effect of healing and elevating. For although philosophy by essence is solely dependent on the natural reason, and is therefore autonomous in its own order, as realized existentially by actual, living, human beings, "it benefits by being exercised in a subject enjoying the radically changed conditions of existence effected gratuitously by the life of grace and the infused intellectual and moral virtues and gifts, in whom they mutually strengthen each other and are integrated into a vital synergy."²²

In the light of this relationship between philosophy and theology, Jacques Maritain defines Christian philosophy as "philosophy it-

²¹ On this point see the masterly study of Professor Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, translated by A. H. C. Downes (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936).

²² Emmanuel Chapman, "Living Thomism," in *The Thomist*, Vol. IV, No. 3 (July, 1942), p. 385.

self in so far as it is situated in those utterly distinctive conditions of existence and exercise into which Christianity has ushered the thinking subject, and as a result of which philosophy *perceives* certain objects and *validly demonstrates* certain propositions, which in any other circumstances would to a greater or lesser extent elude it."²³ Professor Gilson points out that Christian philosophy is a family of philosophies, including in its extent "all those philosophical systems which were in fact what they were only because a Christian religion existed and because they were ready to submit to its influence." Against this background he defines Christian philosophy as "every philosophy which, although keeping the two orders formally distinct, nevertheless considers the Christian revelation as an indispensable auxiliary to reason."²⁴

It remains true, nevertheless, that no matter what its conditions of formation or exercise within the individual philosopher, the worth of any philosophy depends when all is said and done upon its truth, the firmness with which it is based on rational evidence and the rigor with which it demonstrates its conclusions, so that if a philosophy that calls itself Christian falls short of what the essence of philosophy demands, to that extent it is a decadent philosophy.

THE PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY

What should we call the philosophy we have been trying to develop in the course of this work? Many names are possible. For instance, since it is a philosophy developed in accordance with the principles of Aristotle, it can be called the Aristotelian philosophy. This is not to say that it is a mere re-working of Aristotle's philosophy. It implies rather that we have built upon certain basic insights into the nature of reality which were first disclosed by Aristotle. And what was first seen by Aristotle to be the way things are, is still the way things are, for the structure of reality does not change from generation to generation. But while the

²³ *An Essay on Christian Philosophy* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955), p. 30.

²⁴ *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy* (New York: Sheed and Ward, Inc., 1936), p. 37.

philosophy of Aristotle is in this sense ageless, it is also true that by the very nature of its constitution as a science always open to the mystery of being it is susceptible to endless growth and enrichment. The treasures of intelligibility enfolded in the least act of existence are inexhaustible, so that while the basis of philosophy does not change, its horizon is boundless; philosophy will be finished only when the last metaphysician on earth for the last time closes his eyes on being.

If you wish to emphasize the rock-solid foundation of our philosophy in the nature of things as they are, you can call it the Realist philosophy. Stressing the collective labor which has gone into its elaboration over the centuries, it may be termed the Common philosophy. Or, since metaphysics is the archstone of our philosophy, we can call it the philosophy of being.

Among those who have expressed the philosophy of being in a Christian context, St. Thomas Aquinas is outstanding. Much in the way that Aristotle gathered up and synthesized all that had been done before him in philosophy, so did St. Thomas in his day epitomize in a new and daring synthesis all that was worth rescuing in the name of truth. He did more. He deepened his Aristotelian inheritance so profoundly as in effect to transform it, for in virtue of his unique metaphysical intuition of existence, philosophy with St. Thomas "for the first time in its long history was able to reach deeper than the level of inextinguishable essences to the fathomless undercurrents of existence irradiated by them."²⁵ Those for whom St. Thomas has thus transposed the philosophy of being from an essentialist to an existentialist key will frequently signify this profound transformation by calling the philosophy of being Thomist rather than Aristotelian.

Stressing the great teachers who have elaborated and transmitted the philosophy of being in the schools of Europe, the name Scholastic is sometimes used as synonymous with the Thomistic philosophy. The term is open to serious objection, however, in that it is equally used to designate the philosophy taught in general

²⁵ Emmanuel Chapman, "To Be—That Is the Answer," in the Maritain volume of *The Thomist* (Jan., 1943), p. 144.

in the medieval universities — which was in fact a good deal more likely to be Augustinian than Aristotelian in its inspiration.

The ultimate appeal of any philosophy, however, will be not in terms of its originators or its teachers, but in terms of its truth. In the language of St. Thomas himself, "the study of philosophy is that we may know not what men have taught but what the truth of things is."²⁶ In the sense that it is the expression of truth, and therefore everlasting, the philosophy of being is called the perennial philosophy, the enduring philosophy. Given this emphasis, the perennial philosophy is not the particular philosophy of any person or school, but simply the philosophy collectively worked out through the centuries by innumerable anonymous toilers in the vineyard of truth. The perennial philosophy, in short, is philosophy itself, which because it is true is therefore perdurable.

Philosophy is perennial in another sense, in its need for constant renewal. For although the principles of philosophy are timeless, they are nevertheless worked out in time, and it is the task of the philosopher to incarnate the bloodless abstractions of philosophy afresh for each new generation, and confronting the ever new and ever more complex problems of society, to bring "new treasures out of old." In the words of Emmanuel Chapman, "The perennial philosophy by its very nature must be always freshly present. Not ancient or neo, but current and living, it should be ready to answer the most crucial questions of today. The philosophy in touch with existence has the challenge within itself to deepen and perfect itself, and keep itself in a constant state of renewal."²⁷

²⁶ *In De Coelo et Mundo*, I, x, lect. 22.

²⁷ *Loc. cit.*, p. 152.