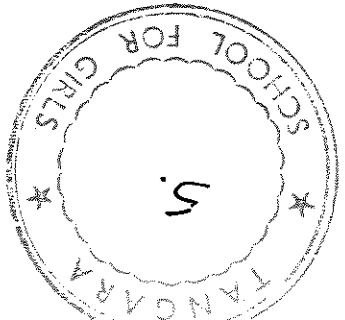


By Joseph M. de Torre

CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY



and "form". That is why it is also very important not to make abrupt changes in theological or catechetical terminology, because the meaning of those terms is precise. It has taken the Church a long time to find the right expressions. A change of terms can easily lead to a change of *concepts*, and thereby to possible errors or confusion.

d. The help of faith not against the use of the intelligence

However, the help that the faith gives to reason is not a labor-saving device. It does not spare the believer his effort to think and to reason. Faith does not substitute itself for reason. It enlightens and empowers reason, but then reason has to move by itself. God does not treat us as puppets, but as intelligent and free beings.

And how does reason function? *In contact with reality.* The light of reason is reality, not dreams or feelings, and faith does not contradict reality at all. It enlightens man so that he can see better, but then he has to *see*, to open his eyes.

Thus, faith does not suppress the natural activity of the intelligence nor the effort of reason to reach the higher truths. The christian judges philosophical doctrines in the light of his faith. And then, with philosophy, not with the faith, he can point out the roots of errors in those doctrines: the error is refuted not by saying that it is contrary to the faith, but by exposing it philosophically, i.e. with arguments from reason. Lastly, what are the rulings of the teaching authority of the Church regarding philosophy?

(i) A continuous insistence on *subordinating* reason to faith, philosophy to theology, *without suppressing* reason, without suppressing philosophy.

(ii) Continuous recommendations to study and to teach the philosophy and theology of St. Thomas Aquinas, on account of the extraordinary harmony of faith and reason accomplished by him. These recommendations of the Church are not mere advice, since they have become part of Canon Law and ratified by the II Vatican Council. So, by law christians are supposed to study and to teach the philosophy and theology of St. Thomas, taking him as their guide.

The Nature of Philosophy

CHAPTER 6

a. History and etymology of the term

What is philosophy? As we have said, it is just common sense, i.e. contact with reality, but deepened through receptivity and reflection.

St. Thomas explains the meaning of the word "philosophy" at the beginning of one of his major works: the *Summa contra gentiles*. He wrote many books, but his two major works are the two *Summas*. *Summa* means a synthesis or collection of topics of discussion arranged in order. While the *Summa contra gentiles* was written in his early life, the *Summa theologiae* is more mature. The former is more philosophical: *contra gentiles* means directed to the gentiles, i.e. to those outside the Church. The *Summa theologiae*, on the other hand, is written for christians, and so it is more theological, but since, as we have seen, philosophy is used by theology, it contains an enormous amount of philosophy as well.

The *Summa contra gentiles* is divided into several books. In the first chapter of the first book, St. Thomas talks about philosophy. He explains that philosophy is the common ground for all mankind, so that through philosophy we can show the gentiles that our faith is the true faith by showing its reasonableness. He then goes on to say that philosophy means almost the same as wisdom. *Philo-sophia* is the love of wisdom.

This word is Greek, and so we have to find out how it came to be used in Greece. Originally the Greeks were using the word *sophia* simply. The word for philosopher was wise-man. Plato, who lived in the 5th century, explains in one of his *Dialogues* how the term philosophy came into existence. He attributes it to Pythagoras, another philosopher, and he says that we can investigate wisdom, we can try to acquire wisdom, but of course we can never achieve complete wisdom or the totality of knowledge, so that, as Socrates put it, the more we know, the more we realize how little we know. He

Let us recall that all revelation is received by man through faith, and faith is a gift from God; hence the absolute dependence on God in order to acquire supernatural wisdom. Then, in addition to the gift of faith, man receives also as a perfection of the gift of faith, the *gift of wisdom*, one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. So, through this gift of wisdom man understands the meaning of what he believes much better. Supernatural wisdom, then, is not just the gift of wisdom from the Holy Spirit, but the *wisdom acquired by man through faith, theology and the gift of wisdom of the Holy Spirit*.

Now, we must remember that the gift of wisdom of the Holy Spirit is a gift of love, because the Holy Spirit is precisely the love of God. Therefore what matters is not to be a brilliant thinker, but to love God very much (the First Commandment). The depth of supernatural wisdom depends on the intensity of loving God.

And then on a lower level we have *natural theology*. What is wisdom on the natural level? What we call metaphysics. And what is metaphysics? The study of the ultimate and most universal causes through natural reason, and it reaches up to God and the spiritual beings. We can say that the relationship between the two wisdoms is the same as between reason and faith, philosophy and theology.

c. A wise man orders everything in relation to God

St. Thomas says that it is proper to the sage, to the philosopher, to order all things in relation to, and in the light of the ultimate cause, which is God. *Order* means arranging things in relation to an end or design, relating *means to ends*, and it is proper to the mind to do this. So, this is what the wiseman does. When everything in our life is in its place, all related to one ultimate end, everything related to God, then everything is *in order*. On the other hand, the failure of man to relate himself to God is what is called *sin*: the greatest of all disorders. And the work of wisdom consists in putting things back in their place relating them all to God. Wisdom considers ultimate causes, and above all the *last end*. We must remember that there are *four* causes to account

says then that philosophy is like the son of the god of plenty and the goddess of want: at once richest (the greatest aspiration of man) and poorest (his inability to reach the heights). But man can always be a *lover of wisdom*: a philosopher. After the rise of Christianity, the term philosophy began to be used to mean the wisdom which can be attained by the *natural light of reason*, as distinct from that wisdom which is directly touched by faith, which is theology.

b. Wisdom as knowledge of ultimate causes

We can describe wisdom as the *knowledge of things by their ultimate causes*, as we have said. From the word wisdom comes wiseman or sage or savant: a scholar, an educated or learned man. A savant is a person who has a profound knowledge of reality, who knows the ultimate truths and can give advice and guidance. Sometimes, he is replaced by the fortune-teller, which is a sign of an impoverished culture. What is the characteristic of wisdom? That it is concerned with the highest and most ultimate causes, and that is why it leads to God. If we start looking for causes, eventually we come to God, the first and ultimate cause of everything. According to the depth of these causes, we christians can distinguish two levels of wisdom: the lower one, that of reason alone, is *natural wisdom*; and the higher one, that of reason illumined by faith, is *supernatural wisdom*.

St. Thomas says that the greatest wisdom is what he calls *sacred doctrine*: the doctrine revealed by God to man, and all the *implications* which man can draw from that doctrine. This doctrine includes therefore both (i) what can be known about God through His creatures, and (ii) what only He knows but communicates to creatures through divine revelation. It includes (i) revelation known through faith, and (ii) theology. Example of truth of revelation: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God". Example of a truth of theology: "There is only one God in three Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit": here there is already an elaboration of theology, although since it has been defined by the Church, it is also a truth of revelation, i.e. implicit in revelation.

for the being or becoming of anything that comes to be. The presence of intelligence is revealed by those four questions which announce the emergence of intelligence in a person:

(i) What is this?

(ii) What is it for?

(iii) What is it made of?

(iv) Who made it? (Who brought it into being?)

The first one is called the *formal cause*: it points to the essence of the thing, *what the thing is*. The second is the *final cause*: the end for which it is made, the end or purpose. The third is the *material cause*. And the fourth is the *efficient cause*: agent, maker, producer. So, these are the four: (i) essence or nature, (ii) purpose, (iii) stuff, and (iv) maker. And these four questions also indicate that this is the field of metaphysics, that is, the study of *being*, because the four of them point at being: what is the *being* of this? what is it? what is it for? what is it made of? what brought it into being? This is metaphysics: the field of the four causes pointing to the being of things? And it is also the approach of common sense.

Now, wisdom considers ultimate causes and above all the last end, the *ultimate final cause* of everything that is or comes to be: it judges and orders all things in the most perfect way, that is, related to the last end.

St. Thomas says also that taking into account the type of order, there are different types of wisdom: there are as many types of wisdom as ways of relating things to an end. Accordingly, he mentions four types of wisdom:

(i) *Metaphysics and sciences* (what he calls *speculative sciences*) consider the order which exists in reality — the reality we perceive through our senses, and which man has not made, but only found. The sciences look at reality and parcel it out among themselves. Each of them looks at one aspect of it: physics, chemistry, biology, etc. And then, metaphysics studies all these realities in relation to the last end.

(ii) The second type is *moral philosophy*: the study of the free actions of man in relation to the last end, or how man ought to behave in relation to his last end.

(iii) The study of the order that human reason makes in its own operations of acquiring knowledge and organizing it: this is *logic*. This is the most difficult study, since we have to

make the greatest effort of reflection: to look at our own thinking. While in metaphysics and the sciences we look at reality directly, in moral philosophy we have to make an effort of reflection to look at our own behavior, and in logic even more so, as we look at our own thinking.

(iv) Lastly, we have the *practical sciences*, also called *arts*, the type of knowledge which is directly concerned with *making things*. Art in Greek is *techné*, hence technique or technology. It is also wisdom in so far as things are related to ends, *made for some purpose*.

This shows also that the mind has two functions: (a) reception, and (b) action. On the one hand, it gathers information and knowledge, and on the other, it orders things to practice. But for practical action, knowledge is required. In order to acquire any technique or art, one has to study. This means that speculative wisdom or the *reception* of knowledge is higher and more important than practical wisdom, and prior to it.

"Speculative" comes from a Latin verb which means mirroring (*speculari, speculum*): what the mind does is to mirror reality. But then, it also acts on reality, it makes things, and that is *practice*, which comes from the Greek for action of making: *praxis*. On the other hand the Greek for reception, looking at, is *theoréin*; hence, "theory" and "practice".

d. Wisdom as science

Wisdom is also science, in fact it is the head of the body of sciences. It directs and judges the other sciences, because the other sciences take for granted what metaphysics studies, namely the most fundamental truths about reality: What is being? What are the first principles of being and reason? Any science, like physics or chemistry, takes for granted that a thing cannot be itself and another in the same sense. What metaphysics does is precisely to look at this principle (called the principle of non-contradiction). What is to be? What is to be itself? and to be another? These are the questions asked by metaphysics (wisdom), and that is why its position is like the head in relation to the body of all the sciences.

plants, and inanimate bodies, whether solid, liquid or gaseous). This is the first degree of elevation above matter. Here we no longer consider *this* or *that* sensible being, but sensible being *as such*, i.e. *abstracted* from its individual and changing conditions: in its *common* (universal) and *permanent* reality. These sciences are difficult because of the effort of abstraction or rising above matter.

Then there is a second degree or level of elevation above matter, wherein we study beings which although cannot exist without matter *can be thought of or conceived without matter*, with a complete abstraction from matter. Sensible matter does not enter in their definition, since they can be conceived without it. These are *abstract quantities or dimensions*, whether continuous (lines, surfaces, solids) or discrete (numbers). Quantity cannot exist alone without matter, but it can be conceived without matter. The science of abstract quantities is called mathematics, and its greater difficulty lies in that it requires a greater effort of abstraction or elevation above matter, but this makes it also more certain and accurate, and thus very useful for the physical sciences, which, on the other hand, are more immersed in reality.

Lastly, we come to the third and highest level of elevation above matter, wherein we consider beings which *can both exist without matter and be conceived without matter*. At this level, we do not look at sensible being as such, or quantity as such, but at *being* as such. And *to be* does not imply any matter at all or any change. To walk, to fall, to eat, to write, to cry or any other such act does, but not to be or the *act of being*. "To be" is wider than any act we can think of. To focus on being requires, therefore, the highest degree of elevation above, or separation from matter. This separation is not a flight from, but a much more pervasive penetration into reality, into reality as such, beyond all the differences of changes and quantities. It is the level of meta-physics or trans-physics (meta-trans-means beyond). At this level, all realities can be looked at, both (i) those which exist and are conceived without matter, such as God and spiritual beings, and (ii) those which may or may not exist without matter, such as substances and accidents. Let us now take a first look at this highest of all sciences (wisdom) on the natural level.

Metaphysics, however, is also science, because it studies the causes of things, and this is what science is, as we have seen: accurate knowledge through causes. But it goes beyond all the other sciences, since it is not satisfied with knowing *mediate or proximate causes*, as other sciences do, but looks for *ultimate causes*: this is what makes it *wisdom* (in the natural order).

e. Philosophy and the other sciences

St. Thomas explains the difference between philosophy and the other sciences by saying that the degrees or types of science can be classified according to the various degrees of *elevation above matter*. It is very important to understand this point well.

"Matter" is the word we use to designate the world we perceive through our senses, the *sensible* world or corporeal world (world of bodies). Now, the first characteristic of this sensible world is that *it is in continuous change*. But science (*episteme* in Greek) is precisely a *stable* knowledge, a knowledge that does not change. It is our understanding of things that changes, but we aim at permanent knowledge, true and valid always and everywhere. A scientific proposition may be expanded, modified, enriched, or discarded, but to be scientific at any stage it has to be stable and permanent. Without stability, there is no accuracy, no necessity, no science. But since matter is the ground of change, in order to reach real scientific knowledge of reality we have to *rise above matter*, so *to speak*.

This is what sciences do. First, they rise a little above matter (which is always changing) in order to discover *general* and *stable* patterns and laws in material bodies. This is the level of the *sciences of nature*. "Nature" in general means the sensible world. It comes from the Latin *natura*, which means "what is born", what comes to be, anything that *moves* from being something to being something else, from non-being to being. In Greek the word for nature is *physis*, hence the terms "physics" and "physical". The object of these physical or natural sciences is, therefore, all bodies or corporeal beings, i.e. *those in whose definition sensible matter enters* (men, animals,