

AN INTRODUCTION
TO
PHILOSOPHY

THE PERENNIAL PRINCIPLES
OF THE CLASSICAL REALIST TRADITION

By

Daniel J. Sullivan

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We are like dwarfs seated on the shoulders of giants. We see more things than the ancients and things more distant, but it is due neither to the sharpness of our sight nor the greatness of our stature, it is simply because they have lent us their own.

BERNARD OF CHARTRES, in John of Salisbury, *Metal.*, III, 4. (Translation that of E. Gilson.)

CHAPTER 29

THE PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY

IN OUR philosophizing in previous chapters we have had occasion from time to time to explore the various fields of knowledge and the way in which they differ from one another. It is now time for us to co-ordinate all these separate insights and consider the problem we left unanswered in our opening chapter: the definition of philosophy in the strict sense. To get our definition into sharper relief we shall first distinguish philosophy from other ways of knowing to which it is closely related and with which it is sometimes confused.

PHILOSOPHY AND COMMON SENSE

As we found to be the case with the term "philosophy" itself we can assign both a broad general meaning and a strict technical meaning to the expression "common sense."

In its wide, popular meaning common sense is simply the conglomeration of generally held opinions and beliefs, more or less well founded, more or less mixed up with error and prejudice, which make up the voice of the community — "what everybody knows." It may also refer in this broad usage to good practical sense in everyday affairs — to "good horse sense."

In a philosophical context the expression has had a number of meanings. For the Romans, common sense meant the vulgar opin-

ions of mankind.¹ For St. Thomas it was a technical expression for the unifying sense.² For certain modern philosophers it has meant a kind of instinct or special feeling for the truth.³

None of these usages square with the strict interpretation we have given to the expression "common sense" above. (See Chapter II.) It is important therefore to recall the exact sense in which we have used it. Common sense refers to the spontaneous activity of the intellect, the way in which it operates of its own native vigor before it has been given any special training. It implies man's native capacity to know the most fundamental aspects of reality, in particular, the existence of things (including my own existence), the first principles of being (the principles of identity, noncontradiction, and excluded middle), and secondary principles which flow immediately from the self-evident principles (the principles of sufficient reason, causality, etc.).

One of the points that links philosophy and common sense is that they both use these principles. They differ however in the way they use them. Common sense uses them unconsciously, unreflectively, uncritically. They can be obscured or deformed for common sense by faulty education, by cultural prejudices, by deceptive sense imagery. Philosophy on the contrary uses these principles critically, consciously, scientifically. It can get at things demonstratively, through their causes. It can therefore defend and communicate its knowledge.

The certainties of common sense, the insights of a reasoning which is implicit rather than explicit, are just as well founded as the certainties of philosophy, for the light of common sense is fundamentally the same as that of philosophy: the natural light of the intellect. But in common sense this light does not return upon itself by critical reflection, is not perfected by scientific reasoning. *Philosophy, therefore, as contrasted with common sense is scientific knowledge; knowledge, that is, through causes.*

A second point which links philosophy and common sense is that

¹ See Cicero, *De Orat.*, I, 3; Seneca, *3rd letter to Quintillian*, Sect. 3.

² See above, p. 71.

³ This doctrine was first held by Thomas Reid (1710-1796), the originator of the school of thought which is known as the Scottish Common Sense School.

they take all reality for their province — common sense blindly, in a kind of instinctive response of the individual to the totality of experience; philosophy consciously, in the endeavor to give every aspect of reality its due. This claim of philosophy to know the whole of reality does not mean that the philosopher makes pretense of knowing everything — the human intellect cannot exhaust the mystery of the smallest being in the universe, let alone everything. It remains true, nevertheless, that all things are the subject matter of philosophy, in the sense that the philosopher takes as his angle of vision or point of view the highest principles, the ultimate causes, of all reality. Along with common sense, then, *philosophy seeks the comprehensive, all-inclusive view of reality; it is the knowledge of all things.*

Philosophy is thus close to common sense and at the same time different from it. It differs from common sense because it holds its conclusions scientifically, with a clarity and depth inaccessible to common sense. It is close to common sense because it shares the universality of common sense and a common insight into the fundamental structure of reality. We might even say that philosophy grows out of common sense, and that common sense taken in its strict meaning is a kind of foreshadowing, a dim silhouette, of philosophy proper. Any philosophy, therefore, that strays very far from common sense is suspect. If it goes so far as to contradict the basic certitudes of common sense, then it is guilty of denying reality itself, and on this point common sense can pass judgment on it.

PHILOSOPHY AND THE DIFFERENT ORDERS OF SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE

We have said that philosophic knowledge differs from common-sense knowledge because it is knowledge through causes. This is the characteristic of all knowledge which can be called scientific, as Aristotle pointed out long ago. You have scientific knowledge when you can give the causes of a thing, its necessary reasons. You can explain the reason why. You can tell what will happen whenever those causes are found under the same conditions. Com-

mon-sense knowledge can tell you that water expanding into steam will exert pressure; scientific knowledge tells you why and can predict with certainty the degree of pressure that a given amount of steam will exert on a measured surface.

But, as we have seen, there are different kinds and different fields of scientific explanation. Some branches of investigation get at the immediate or proximate causes of things, others get at the remote or ultimate causes. It is, therefore, one of the tasks of philosophy to find the hierarchy and order of the different sciences.⁴

THE PRINCIPLE OF ORDER OF THE BRANCHES OF KNOWLEDGE

Using the word "science" in the older sense to cover all kinds of certain knowledge through causes, our present task is to find some principle by which we can differentiate between the various fields of scientific inquiry. One possible approach to this problem is through a consideration of the kinds of causes stressed by the different kinds of knowing; thus, for example, the concern of the physical sciences is seen to be with material causes, the special interest of mathematics with formal causes, while philosophy especially stresses formal and final causes.⁵ Another approach is in terms of method; philosophy and mathematics, for example, are deductive in a way not possible for the natural sciences, whose method is mainly inductive. But the ideal principle of differentiation is found, according to the philosophy of Aristotle, in the various degrees of formal abstraction.⁶

SCIENCE AND PHILOSOPHY ON THE FIRST LEVEL OF ABSTRACTION

The first level of abstraction is the level on which the intellect abstracts from the concrete individuality of material things and

⁴ "It is the function of the wise man to put things in order, because wisdom is primarily the perfection of reason and it is the characteristic of reason to know order." St. Thomas, *On the Ethics of Aristotle*, lect. 1.

⁵ See W. R. Thompson, *Science and Common Sense* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1937), Chapter 7.

⁶ For the kinds and levels of abstraction, see above, Chapter 25.

studies the qualitative characteristics they possess in common. This sphere of knowledge is coextensive with that part of reality which falls directly under our senses — the universe of changing bodies. This is the domain the Greek philosophers called "physics," and it presents, as they saw, a double aspect: an aspect of change and an aspect of permanence. Beneath the restless tides of change which make up the horizon of the senses, there is a stabilizing reality to which the intellect can reach, a permanence of structure which guarantees the constancy of things and their operations, and thus renders possible a *science* of changing bodies.

In investigating this realm of nature the intellect can oscillate between two poles. It can try on the one hand to penetrate to the inner intelligible structure of things, to find out their essential constitution, their unchanging inner nature or being. Or it can on the other hand turn to the peripheral aspect of things, to the qualities they display and the operations they perform, things which are immediately verifiable by the senses and capable of measurement.

To illustrate: my curiosity may be aroused by a certain plant I run across. I can ask this kind of question about it: How does it fit into the general classification of plants? What is its cellular structure? What kind of food sustains it? To answer this kind of question I have to turn to the report of my senses. Or I can ask another kind of question: What is the difference between a live plant and a dead plant? What are the characteristics of living being? What is a soul? I can answer this kind of question only in the light of the intelligible values of being itself.

Because this plane of abstraction offers two ways of understanding the real, we say that there are two distinct kinds of knowledge, which we may term the ontological and the empiriological according as the intellect penetrates the inner nature of things or as it moves toward their sensible appearances.⁷ The first kind of knowledge is called the philosophy of nature: *philosophy* because it stresses the being aspect of things; *of nature*, because it is limited to the being of changing, material things.

The second kind of knowledge is called today physical science,

⁷ We are using here the terminology proposed by Maritain in his *Philosophy of Nature* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1951).

natural science, empirical science. It is called *science* because it reaches stable knowledge through causes. It is called *physical*, *natural*, or *empirical* because it deals with the area of sensible, material reality (*physics* is from the Greek word for nature; *nature* and *empirical* both indicate the realm of the sensible).

Thus the natural sciences and the philosophy of nature share the same subject matter — the world of changing bodies — but study it from different points of view.⁸ Even on this plane, we see verified, though in a relative way, the statement that science deals with proximate causes, philosophy with ultimate causes, for the questions which the philosophy of nature asks — what is change, what is a body, etc. — are about things that are taken for granted, taken on faith, so to speak, by the physical sciences. They are the questions that are ultimate for this order of reality.⁹

PHILOSOPHY AND MATHEMATICS

A second genus of knowledge is constituted by those sciences which have developed out of man's penetration into that deeper layer of reality where being is disclosed in its quantitative aspects. Analogously to the division we found on the first level of abstraction we are obliged again to separate the mathematical sciences from the philosophy of mathematics. Thus, where arithmetic studies the properties of numbers, or geometry the nature of plane surfaces, the philosophy of mathematics studies the being itself of number, quantity, and so on.

We might note here the special character of mathematical physics which is a kind of mathematics of nature. In this science the intellect moves from one plane of abstraction to another; though

⁸ In the technical language of philosophy the subject matter of a science is called the *material object* of that science. The point of view from which it is studied is called its *formal object*. Man, for example, is the material object of the sciences of anthropology, anatomy, political economy, sociology. The formal aspect or point of view from which man is studied varies of course with each of these sciences, and is the principle by which they are differentiated from each other; thus, anthropology studies man as an animal, anatomy, according to his skeletal structure, etc.

⁹ Because they are not the absolutely ultimate questions — for the philosophy of nature leans on the principles of metaphysics — we say that the philosophy of a nature is an imperfect or dependent wisdom; cf. Aristotle: "Physics is also a wisdom, but it is not the first kind" (*Metaphysics*, IV, 3; 1005 b 1).

formally mathematical, since its method of analysis is mathematical, it is materially physical: *what* is analyzed is physical reality — (this is the "physics" part of mathematical physics).

METAPHYSICS OR THE FIRST PHILOSOPHY

The third level of abstraction brings us finally to the domain of philosophy in the strict sense — the plane on which the intellect grasps being as being, *being* isolated in all its intelligible purity as against its partial revelation in *this* or *that* being. Here the intellect penetrates through the veils of matter to the very nerve of reality, to being in its full transcendental value, as it is realized analogically, from the least of existing things to the greatest. This is the heart of philosophy, metaphysics, the philosophy of being, the *First Philosophy* of Aristotle.

PHILOSOPHY AND THE HIGHER WISDOMS

Aristotle offered the name theology as an alternative to first philosophy because the tracing of causes to their origin brings us back to that part of reality which is permanent, unchanging, eternal — to God Himself, "for God is thought to be among the causes of all things and to be a first principle." Hence for Aristotle, metaphysics is "the divine science."¹⁰

The religions of Judaism and Christianity, however, brought to the world the knowledge of a wisdom higher than the wisdom of philosophy: the knowledge of things divine which is given to us by God Himself through revelation. It became necessary therefore to distinguish more explicitly than did the Greeks between the purely rational, philosophical knowledge of God — which is called natural theology — and the knowledge of God we receive through revelation — which is called, in its systematic formulation, revealed or sacred theology.

There is, in other words, more than one path to the knowledge of God and therefore more than one wisdom. The wisdom of sacred theology is called a higher wisdom than philosophy because its

¹⁰ *Metaphysics*, I, 2; 983 a 8; cf. Cicero: "Wisdom is the knowledge of things divine and human" (*De Finibus* II, 12, 37).

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.