THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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THE BODYGUARDS OF TRUTH

Mortimer Adler

**The Aquinas Medal Acceptance Speech,
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PART 1 OF 2

My serious study of philosophy began when, at Columbia University in the early twenties, I took a course in the history of philosophy taught by Professor F.J.E. Woodbridge. Just before Christmas in 1921, 1 received as a Christmas gift, a copy of the Oxford translation of Aristotle's *Metaphysics,* with an inscription from Professor Woodbridge that read as follows: "To Mortimer Adler who has already begun to make good use of this book."

I owe to Professor Woodbridge, for whom, as for Thomas Aquinas, Aristotle was "the Philosopher," my early sense of the number and variety of the truths that might be found by a careful study of Aristotle's works, as well as a recognition of the soundness of Aristotle's approach to philosophical problems and his method of philosophizing. But I owe to Thomas Aquinas, whose *Summa Theologica* I discovered a few years later, the instructive example of a

powerful use of that method, together with the direction and guidance one needs not only in the study of Aristotelian philosophy, but also in the application of it to problems not faced by Aristotle himself.

With one or two exceptions, all the fundamental philosophical truths that I have learned in more than fifty years, to which I am now firmly committed, I have learned from Aristotle, from Aquinas as a student of Aristotle, and from Jacques Maritain as a student of them both. I have searched my mind thoroughly and I cannot find in it a single truth that I have learned from works in modern philosophy written since the beginning of the 17th century. If anyone is outraged by this judgment about almost four hundred years of philosophical thought, let him recover from it by considering the comparable judgment that almost all modern and contemporary philosophers have made about the two thousand years of philosophical thought that preceded the 17th century. In view of the fact that philosophy, unlike science, does not advance with each succeeding generation of men at work, it should not be deemed impossible, or even unlikely, that the first two thousand years of philosophical thought discovered a body of truths to which little if anything has been added and from which much has been lost in the last four hundred years.

Principles for the Correction of Error

The pre-modern career of philosophy contains errors as well as truths. As I have already intimated, the truths, for the most part, have been contributed by Aristotle and by Aristotelians. Even the tradition of Aristotelian thought is not without faults—deficiencies and errors. In the course of my own work as a student of Aristotle and Aquinas, I have, from time to time, uncovered such faults and tried to correct them. Such efforts on my part, may I say in passing, especially essays and books that criticized the traditional theory of species, the traditional view of democracy, and traditional formulations of the proofs of God's existence, were not universally applauded in the late thirties and early forties by my fellow-members in the American Catholic Philosophical Association. Whether, if reviewed today, they would be differently appraised, I cannot say. To win tolerance for such fault-finding, I did try to say then, as I would say now, that in every case the correction of an error or the repair of a deficiency in the philosophy of Aristotle and Aquinas rests on the underlying and controlling principles of Aristotelian and Thomistic thought. In fact, the discovery of such errors or deficiencies almost always springs from close attention and leads to a deeper understanding of those principles.

Here lies what for me is the remarkable difference between the faults I have found in modern philosophy and the faults I have found in the tradition of Aristotelian and Thomistic thought. The errors and deficiencies in this or that modern philosopher's thought arise either from his misunderstanding or, worse, his total ignorance of insights and distinctions indispensable to getting at the truth—insights and distinctions that were so fruitful in the work of Aristotle and Aquinas, but which modern philosophers have either ignored or, misunderstanding them, have dismissed. In addition, the errors or deficiencies in the thought of this or that modern philosopher cannot be corrected by appealing to his own most fundamental principles, as is the case with Aristotle and Aquinas. On the contrary, it is usually his principles—his points of departure—that embody the little errors in the beginning which, as Aristotle and Aquinas so well knew, have such serious consequences in the end.

To say, as I have said, that I have not learned a single fundamental truth from the writings of modern philosophers is not to say that I have learned nothing at all from them. With the exception of Hegel and other post-Kantian German philosophers, I have read their works with both pleasure and profit. The pleasure has come from the perception of errors the serious consequences of which tend to reinforce my hold on the truths I have learned from Aristotle and Aquinas. The profit has come from the perception of new but genuine problems, not the pseudo-problems, perplexities, and puzzlements invented by therapeutic positivism and by linguistic or analytical philosophy in our own century.

The genuine problems to which I am referring are questions that have been generated under the cultural circumstances characteristic of modern times, especially the effect on philosophy of its gradually recognized distinction from investigative science and from dogmatic theology, as well as the effect on it of certain developments in modern science and certain revolutionary changes in the institutions of modern society.

The profit to be derived from the perception of these problems (of which Aristotle and Aquinas were not aware or were only dimly aware) is the stimulus it gives us to try to extend their thought in response to them. I have always found that I could solve such problems within the general framework and in the light of the basic principles of their thought. They may not have faced the questions that we are obliged to answer, but they nevertheless do provide us with the clues or leads needed for discovering the answers.

Many years ago, in our early days together at the University of Chicago, my friend Professor Richard McKeon once quipped that the difference between the members of the American Philosophical Association and the members of the American Catholic Philosophical Association was that philosophers in our secular universities specialized in very good and novel questions, to which the scholastic philosophers did not yet have the answers, whereas the scholastics had a rich supply of true principles and conclusions but usually failed to be aware of many important questions to the answering of which they could be applied. My own experience has confirmed the wisdom as well as the wit of that observation. Let me illustrate the point by one example drawn from some work that I have been doing recently in political and economic philosophy, which concerns the relation of liberty and of equality to justice.

The following questions have, in various forms, pervaded the thinking of the last hundred and fifty years about liberty and equality. Of these two goods, the circumstantial freedom of individuals in society and the equality of conditions under which individuals may live in society, which is the supreme or sovereign value? Should individual freedom be encroached upon to establish a complete equality of conditions? Should inequalities of condition be allowed to remain if that is necessary to maximize individual freedom? Is there some way of reconciling liberty and equality so that the ideal that each represents can be served without sacrificing the other?

So far as I know, these questions do not appear in ancient or mediaeval thought, certainly not with the clarity and explicitness with which modem thinkers have posed them. I must also say that, so far as I know, sound answers to these questions cannot be found in modern thought. Quite the contrary! Such answers as can be found there are, upon close examination, unsatisfactory—inadequate and untenable. However, recourse to the wisdom of Aristotelian and Thomistic thought provides us with two crucial insights which hold the key that will solve these modern problems. The first is that neither liberty nor equality is a supreme or sovereign value. Justice is sovereign; the pursuit of both liberty and equality must be regulated by criteria of justice. When they are so regulated, there is no irreconcilable conflict between efforts to maximize liberty on the one hand and efforts to maximize equality on the other, for neither should be maximized beyond a limit appointed by justice. We should not seek more liberty than justice allows, for beyond this limit lies not liberty, but license—actions that injure other individuals or the community as a whole. We should not seek more equality than justice requires, an equality with respect to all

the external goods or conditions to which everyone has a natural and, therefore, an equal right. Within these limits, both equality and liberty can be maximized without conflict. 🕮

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