

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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THE BODYGUARDS OF TRUTH

Mortimer Adler

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PART 2 OF 2

Winston Churchill said, “In wartime, truth is so precious that it should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies” to safeguard it against detection by the enemy. In modern times, philosophical thought also needs a bodyguard to protect it from succumbing to the errors that abound on all sides. Or perhaps I should say that, in the life of the mind, the pursuit of truth is so precarious that it needs safeguards to keep it from falling into error. These safeguards are themselves truths—a relatively small number of insights and distinctions that should underlie all our thinking to protect us from the little errors in the beginning that have such serious consequences in the end.

Let me, on this occasion, briefly state certain insights and distinctions that, in my own philosophizing, have served as the bodyguards of truth. I owe all of them to Aristotle and Aquinas or to the

philosophical tradition associated with their names. To mention all the errors from which these insights and distinctions save us would extend this address far into the night. I shall content myself with brief indications of typical modern errors against which they seal the mind.

1. Psychology and theory of knowledge. Before I began carefully to study Aquinas' *Treatise on Man* in the *Summa*, I was exposed to Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and, I should also add, I taught psychology at a time when the introspective psychology then regnant was first challenged by John B. Watson's behaviorism. That is why I will never forget the light that swept across my mind when I first came upon the passage I shall now mention. It occurs in Article 2 of Question 85 in the *Treatise on Man*, where Aquinas replies to the objections of those who say that sensible and intelligible species are that which we perceive and understand.

To make the point quite clear, let me translate these mediaeval terms into the modern vernacular, by referring to both sorts of species as ideas, just as Locke did. Thus translated, the point Aquinas makes, a point totally ignored by all of modern psychology, is that ideas are not that which we apprehend, but that by which we apprehend whatever it is that we do apprehend. Perceptions, imaginations, and memories (ideas in the sensible order) are wholly the means or instrumentalities by which we apprehend sensible objects. Concepts (ideas in the intelligible order) are wholly the means or instrumentalities by which we apprehend intelligible objects.

From this it also follows that we never experience our own ideas; we experience perceived objects but never the perceptions by which we perceive them; we understand intelligible objects but we have no awareness of the concepts by which we understand them, not even when the mind reflects upon its own operations. Ideas are completely self-effacing as the means by which objects are presented to the mind. They are, therefore, totally uninspectible, unexperienceable, unapprehensible.

Please try to imagine the tortured hours I had spent teaching an introspective psychology that pretended to be directly exploring and examining the contents of our minds, and defending it against a behaviorism that regarded the contents of consciousness as mythical inventions. Please try also to imagine the intense discomfort that I suffered in being unable to avoid the consequences that Berkeley drew from Locke, the consequences that Hume drew

from Berkeley and Locke, and the monstrous invention of what Professor Veatch has called the “transcendental turn,” to which Kant deemed it necessary to resort in order to get around Hume. By doing so, you may be able to form some impression of the extent to which my mind was relieved as well as enlightened by that one insight I learned from Aquinas; and how radically it was liberated from the philosophical mistakes that followed from Locke’s little error in the beginning. It actually was at the very beginning of his *Essay* that Locke, explaining his use of the word “idea” to cover whatever is meant by phantasm, notion, or species, said ideas are “whatsoever is the object of the understanding when a man thinks.”

That statement contains another error which has proliferated in a variety of ways, most disastrously in the nominalism of Berkeley and Hume and in much of contemporary positivism and analytic or linguistic philosophy. Just as Locke used the word “idea” to cover without distinction what Aquinas distinguished as sensible and intelligible species, so he used the word “understanding,” as others have used the word “mind,” to cover the quite different cognitive powers of the sensitive and the intellectual faculties, without clearly distinguishing the one from the other. (This is one error that Kant did not make.)

From these twin errors flow the modern failures to deal with universals and to solve the problems appropriate to a philosophy of language. Even worse, from them flow the insoluble paradoxes and puzzlements that result from regarding our subjective ideas—the ideas that each has in his own mind—as not only objects that we directly apprehend, but also as representations of the really existing things that we cannot directly apprehend, but about which, nevertheless, we seek to acquire knowledge. Those paradoxes and puzzlements can be avoided or resolved in terms of the Thomistic insight that ideas are neither objects apprehended nor representations of things unapprehended, and in terms of the Thomistic distinction between our apprehension of objects, which is neither true nor false, and our knowledge of things by judgments which are either true or false.

I would add that the modern dichotomy of things existing outside the mind (often mistakenly referred to as having objective rather than real existence) in contradistinction to ideas existing inside the mind (regarded as having subjective existence) should be replaced by the Thomistic trichotomy of the real existence of things, the intentional existence of objects, and the subjective existence of ideas.

2. *Moral and political philosophy.* In turning now to the safeguards of truth in the sphere of moral and political philosophy, I pass over consequential modern errors in metaphysics, comparable to those I have just mentioned in psychology and the theory of knowledge. Before Locke, the modern period has only three thinkers—Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz—who address themselves to questions that belong to metaphysics as the science of being, the modes of being, and the properties of being. The diverse mistakes they make with regard to substances and causes, matter and form, body and mind, do not spring from a single little error like that about ideas. I will, therefore, not attempt to analyze in detail what I think is the misdirection of their thought. After Locke, and especially after Hume and Kant, there are remarkably few modern thinkers who deal with the problems of metaphysics as those are set forth in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and Aquinas' *De Ente et Essentia*. The subject-matter that is examined and illuminated in those two treatises has been *terra incognita* for almost three hundred years. All the while, the word "metaphysics" has been used by positivists as a term of reproach to name post-Kantian speculations which cannot be defended against their criticisms, but which are also not metaphysical in the proper sense of that term.

In political philosophy, two controlling insights serve as guardians of truth. One is the insight that enables us to understand that the state is both natural and conventional (natural in its final cause, conventional in its efficient cause). With this understood, we are saved from the necessity of imagining the origin of the state and government by recourse to the myth about men living in a state of nature. That modern myth is still in vogue, as two widely discussed recent books in political philosophy make painfully evident. Many serious errors in both books—the one by Professor Rawls and the one by Professor Nozick—might have been avoided had an understanding of human nature and the naturalness of the state not been displaced by fictions concerning the state of nature and the social contract.

The other controlling insight in political philosophy lies in an understanding of two distinct senses of the common good—on the one hand, the public good that is common because it is participated in by the members of an organized community; on the other hand, the private good that is common because it is the same in all men. The first of these common goods, the *bonum commune communitatis*, is the end aimed at directly by just governments; the second, the *bonum commune humanis*, is the temporal happiness or good human life which is man's ultimate end on earth, and toward the achieve-

ment of which the public good and private virtue are indispensable means.

This insight saves us from the central deficiency in Mill's utilitarianism—his inability to relate the general happiness, or the happiness of others, to the individual's own happiness as the ultimate end of his striving. We act for our own happiness directly, but for the happiness of others we act indirectly when we act for the public good of the community, which is an indispensable condition of their being able to make good lives for themselves.

What I have just said would not be understood by a single modern thinker who has anything to say about happiness in his moral philosophy. All of them make two mistakes that an understanding of Aristotle's *Ethics* would have helped them to avoid. One is their failure to distinguish between happiness as a terminal end (an end that can be reached and enjoyed at a given moment in time—or in eternity), and happiness as a normative end (an end that, being the temporal whole of an entire life well lived, can never be experienced or enjoyed at any moment in the process). Inseparable from that mistake is their misconception of happiness in purely psychological terms as the state of contentment that results from satisfying whatever desires an individual happens to have. Not a single modern philosopher, from Locke, Kant, and J. S. Mill on, conceives happiness in purely ethical terms as the quality of a whole life that results from satisfying, successively and cumulatively, not any desires, but only right desires.

The reason for this is an even deeper underlying failure—the failure to take note of the Aristotelian and Thomistic distinction between natural and elicited desires: desires common to all men because they are rooted in the specific nature and capacities of man, and desires that differ from individual to individual because they are products of individual circumstances, individual differences, and individual experiences. Let me use the terms “natural needs” and “individual wants” to name these two distinct types of human desire. The things we call good because we do in fact want them are only apparent goods; the things we ought to desire because they are in fact good are, in contradistinction, real goods. This is another distinction to be found in Aristotle which moral philosophy in modern times has ignored.

Only when this distinction is understood, can we recognize the self-evident truth of the moral imperative that we ought to desire everything that is really good for us and nothing but that which is really good. Without it, little sense can be made of Augustine's

magnificent maxim: Happy is the man who has everything he desires, provided he desire nothing amiss. Without it, and without the insight that natural rights derive from natural needs or right desires, the doctrine of natural rights ceases to give substance to the theory of general, as distinct from special, justice, which is still another distinction currently ignored.

I cannot go on without adding that my delight in Augustine's succinct summary of the happy life is intensified by noting its correlation with Aristotle's definition of happiness as the quality of a life lived in accordance with virtue; for moral virtue is simply the habit of desiring nothing amiss.

I have left for the last one point that would have saved moral philosophy in modern times, especially in the last hundred years, from its unsolved perplexities with regard to the grounds upon which normative judgments can claim to be true. If the only type of truth that is recognized is the truth that lies in the agreement between a judgment and the reality it describes, then normative judgments—assertions of what ought to be, not assertions of what is—cannot be either true or false. The only way to avoid the conclusion that ethics must be non-cognitive is to recognize that the truth in normative judgments is quite distinct from the truth in descriptive judgments. Aristotle and Aquinas are the only philosophers in the whole tradition of Western thought who accurately perceived the difference between what they called speculative and practical truth, which I have just called descriptive and normative truth.

The distinction is made in a single sentence in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Practical truth, Aristotle says there, is the truth of a judgment that conforms to right desire, whereas speculative truth is the truth of a judgment that agrees with the way things really are. The normative judgment that something ought to be desired because it is really good is a judgment that is true because it conforms to a right desire. In contrast, a normative judgment is false if it asserts that something which a man wants but does not need—an apparent, not a real good—ought to be desired.

The whole body of ethical truths emerges from the distinction between real and apparent goods, the distinction between natural needs and individual wants, and the insight that needs are always right desires whereas wants may be wrong desires or, at best, permissible desires—permissible because innocuous, as they are when what is wanted by an individual does not prevent him or other individuals from attaining what is needed.

Conclusion

Let me mention one other lesson that all later philosophers should have learned from Aristotle. It is a lesson that Aquinas learned well and honored by his observance of its precepts, but one which has not been generally honored by the practice of thinkers in modern times.

“The investigation of truth,” Aristotle tells us, “is in one way hard, in another easy,” for “no one is able to attain the truth adequately, while, on the other hand, we do not collectively fail.” The measure of mankind’s success in the collective pursuit of truth, especially philosophical truth, will depend on the degree to which philosophers follow Aristotle’s recommendation that each generation of thinkers should “call into council the views of [their] predecessors in order that [they] may profit by whatever is sound in their thought and avoid their errors.”

This recommendation certainly was not followed in the system-building efforts of Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz, each of whom engaged in philosophical thought as if he were the first philosopher on earth. Nor can it be said of other modern thinkers, especially those in our own century, for whom the great philosophical works prior to the 17th century are either closed books misread and misjudged because of the modern prejudice that anything written before the dawn of modern times cannot possibly have much, if any, truth in it. In contrast, the whole of the *Summa Theologica* is a sustained example of conscientious observance of this recommendation.

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Elaine Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Phone: 312-943-1076 Mobile: 312-280-1011

David S. Peterson, Managing Director

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