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♦ PART 1 of 2 ♦

In a little more than twenty years, the honor of delivering the Annual Association Address has been thrice conferred on me—in Chicago in 1934, in Milwaukee in 1945, and tonight in Cincinnati. I am grateful not only for this honor, but also for the opportunity afforded by each of these occasions to report on work in which I was currently engaged. I would like to think that one reason for each invitation was the fact that in each case the work was a little off the beaten track.

In 1934, shortly after I had become notorious at the University of Chicago for being a non-Catholic Thomist who introduced non-Catholic students to the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas, I was invited to discuss the place of scholastic philosophy in a secular university. In 1945, several years after Father Walter Farrell and I had been working together on the theory of democracy, I was given the opportunity to summarize our results in a statement on the future of democracy.¹ Tonight, after spending four years at the Institute for Philosophical Research on the problem of philosophical diversity, I am glad to have the opportunity to talk to you about controversy in the life and teaching of philosophy.

We have just completed a book on the nature of controversy and on the method of constructing the controversies about basic philosophical subjects. This book is intended as a preamble to a series of books which will attempt to set forth the controversies about such subjects as freedom, law, knowledge, man, the state. A book on the controversy about freedom is now in the process of being written.

I believe I am speaking for my fellow-workers as well as for myself when I say that we feel that the book on the nature and method of controversy contains discoveries of consequence for the study of philosophy and for its future development. I am going to try to cover its main conclusions for you in this brief paper. To do this, I shall, first, summarize these conclusions; second, expand on those which need amplification; and third, indicate what consequences follow from them if they are true. The one thing I shall not undertake, because it cannot be done in the time, is to try to prove to you that they are true.

1

To prepare you for the summary of our conclusions, I must call your attention to the fact which is our point of departure, and to the assumption we have made about what lies behind this fact.

The fact is simply that a diversity of philosophical theories or doctrines has always existed and always will. This fact is sometimes made the basis for doubting the existence or attainability of truth in philosophical inquiry, but it is susceptible of other interpretations which are quite consistent with the conception of philosophy as a pursuit of truth which progressively achieves its goal. That an irreducible plurality of philosophies can persist until the end of time is inconsistent only with the hope that philosophical unanimity can be achieved on earth. For a careful analysis of what is and is not entailed by the fact of philosophi-

cal diversity, I refer you to the brilliant essay by Dr. James Collins on “*The Problem of a Philosophia Perennis*.”²

The assumption we have made is that behind the diversity lie genuine agreements and disagreements among philosophers about the subjects of their inquiries. Stated more precisely, we assume that it is always possible for philosophers to agree or disagree when they are considering the same subject, even though actually they sometimes do neither.

This assumption is not universally shared. The opposite assumption is quite prevalent in contemporary thought. It holds that the diversity of philosophies is like the diversity to be found in works of art rather than like the diversity of theories or hypotheses to be found in empirical science. Just as one cannot treat two different paintings as if they were pictures of the same object, concerning which they must either agree or disagree, so one cannot treat two different philosophies in that way either. The fact of philosophical diversity is regarded as ultimate. Neither actual nor possible agreements and disagreements are thought to lie behind it.

The assumption we have made is required by our view that philosophy, no less than empirical science, though quite differently, involves the pursuit and attainment of objective truth. The opposite assumption is required by the opposite view, which doubts or denies that philosophy has any concern with objective truth. These two assumptions lead to opposite views of the role of controversy in philosophy.

According to the assumption we reject, controversy is misguided and futile. When philosophers differ, they should not dispute with one another as if there were real issues between them, which warrant rational debate. They should recognize their differences as irresolvable and merely try to understand their diversity as such. According to the assumption we have made, fruitful controversy is possible. Philosophers who differ can disagree, and rational debate can serve the purpose of clarifying the issues and moving toward their resolution.

To the fact of philosophical diversity and to the assumption we have made about it, let us add one other preliminary consideration—our conception of controversy. Fruitful controversy rests on the possibility of genuine issues which are susceptible of rational debate. Genuine issues are possible only if philosophers can disagree by answering in opposite ways one and the same question about one and the same subject. Such disagreements can occur in philosophy only to the extent that philosophers are able to achieve what we have called minimal topical agreements. These agree-

ments, unlike categorical agreements, do not unite two men in a common judgment for which they both claim truth. They consist rather of agreements in understanding, such as agreement about the subject under discussion and agreement about the question concerning it. Given such agreements between them, two men may either take the same side or opposite sides of the issue and thus be in categorical agreement or disagreement.³

With these preliminaries covered, I can now summarize the main conclusions we have reached as the result of four years of work on philosophical diversity in general and on the diversity about freedom in particular. They are as follows:

(1) *Controversy is essential to the philosophical enterprise as a whole.* Engaging in controversy is not essential to the work of the individual philosopher. He can pursue in complete isolation his objective of knowing what is or should be the case. Conceivably, he might attain the truth he is seeking without paying the slightest attention to the thoughts of his fellow men. This possibility does not exclude the utility of philosophy as a collective endeavor. But it exists as a collective endeavor only to the extent that philosophers forsake their solitude and some-how confront, one another in the light of their differences. To whatever extent the total philosophical diversity involves disagreement, controversy becomes an essential part of the philosophical enterprise as a whole.

(2) *With exceptions so rare that even they may be doubted, philosophers do not actually join issue.* Philosophers fail to disagree because they fail to achieve the minimal topical agreements prerequisite to genuine disagreement. In consequence, philosophical controversy has seldom if ever *actually* taken place. This conclusion applies to the written record of philosophical thought across the centuries as well as to the dialogues of contemporaries who engage in oral discourse or in correspondence, through letters or in the journals⁴

(3) Faced with this fact and rejecting the assumption that makes philosophical controversy impossible, *we have concluded that the genuine disagreements and the rational debate which constitute fruitful controversy must be implicit in philosophical discussion, even if they are not actually present there.* The immediate corollaries of this conclusion are twofold: first, that it must be possible to construct actual controversies from the materials afforded by the actual discussions in which they are implicit; and second, that, so far as the written record of past philosophical thought is concerned, the work of constructing the latent controversies must be done in order to give them actual existence and to make them explicitly available for study.

(4) *The work of constructing controversies requires a method that is quite distinct from any of the methods which have been or can be employed in the conduct of philosophical inquiry itself.* Let me add here parenthetically that we think we have devised such method and put it successfully to work in our construction of the several related controversies about human freedom.

(5) *In certain respects, this method resembles the methods of the empirical sciences.* Its constructions are hypotheses initially formed as a result of observing the discussion that has actually taken place, and subsequently tested by reference to all available, relevant data. But in one crucial respect, this method differs from the methods of empirical science as well as of philosophical thought. It is a method of dealing with the diversity of theories or opinions as such, and so moves on the plane of second intentions, in the sense that its only objects are intentions of the mind. The methods of empirical science and of philosophical inquiry, on the other hand, all move on the plane of first intentions, for their objects are the realities intended by the mind. So far as they deal with diversity, it is a diversity of phenomena or of natures and beings, not a diversity of opinions or theories.⁵

(5) *The constructions achieved by this method must be completely neutral with respect to the truth or falsity of the philosophical doctrines which are involved in the controversies it constructs.* They must, therefore, be formulated in a language that is neutral with respect to the technical vocabularies and idioms of the several philosophies involved. One cannot actually participate in a controversy as a party without being a partisan for the truth of a particular theory or doctrine as against others. But detachment from such partisanship, or impartiality, is required for the construction of issues if these are to be acceptable to men who hold opposed philosophical views on the questions at issue.⁶

(6) *Having the requisite neutrality, these formulations also have a kind of truth which is quite distinct from the doctrinal truth that is at stake in the controversy itself.* Philosophical doctrines, when true, give us knowledge of whatever realities are the objects of inquiry. These constructions, when true, give us knowledge of the controversies that underlie the diversity of true and false philosophical doctrines. It is obviously possible for men to be united in such truth even though they are divided on points of doctrinal truth.

2

The conclusions I have just summarized do not, need further explanation for the most part. But some amplification may throw light on three points which, I suspect, may be troubling you.

The first of these is a statement of fact which may seem to you to run counter to everyone's experience. I said that philosophical controversy has seldom if ever *actually* taken place. No matter how much I emphasize the word "actually" to make clear that I am not denying the latent or implicit existence of controversy in the life of philosophy, your reaction may be that philosophical controversy is plain and rife on all sides—in every epoch of the past, in the contemporary journals, and in meetings such as these.

If that is your reaction, then it may be that you have too easily acquiesced in the familiar complaint about philosophy, as compared with science, that philosophers always and everywhere disagree. Would that that were the case, for then philosophy would be full of controversy. But that is simply not the case, as careful attention to the logical conditions of genuine disagreement makes clear.

Two men can be in genuine disagreement only when these two conditions are satisfied: (a) they must be discussing a subject which is identical for both of them, and (b) they must be answering a question whose terms they understand in the same way. Only then is it possible for them to join issue and to disagree by giving different answers, both of which cannot be true.

These conditions are extremely difficult to satisfy even when two philosophers confront one another in actual discourse with all the patience, good will, and intellectual acumen that is necessary for the task. If your experience of philosophical meetings is anything like mine, it tells you that such disagreement is a rare event, and that sustained rational debate of the issues is even rarer. These things are rarer still in the history of philosophy, if they have ever occurred at all. The greater the philosophers, as measured by the magnitude of their original contributions, the further removed they are from actually joining issue with one another.

What has actually occurred in the history of philosophy and what occurs everyday among philosophers is a counterfeit of genuine disagreement which, for want of a better name, we have called "subjective disagreement." On a matter about which he is concerned, Philosopher A is occupied with certain questions to which he thinks Philosopher B gives the wrong answers. Without making sure that Philosopher B is considering the same matter or that he understands the questions in the same way, Philosopher A "takes issue" with Philosopher B, and advances arguments aimed at refuting him. Since two can play at this game, Philosopher B reciprocates by "taking issue" with and refuting Philosopher A.

The topical agreements prerequisite to genuine disagreement are

lacking here. Each philosopher “took issue” with the other, but they did not *join issue*, because each was answering his own questions about a subject he had set up for himself. About that subject and to those questions, each attributed wrong answers to the other, and acted as judge in his own case. Since they did not join issue with one another, their arguments and counter-arguments do not constitute a rational debate. They are merely polemical attack and counter-attack.⁷

In other words, the subjective disagreement of Philosopher A with Philosopher B only within the mind of Philosopher A or the minds of his partisan followers. It is not identical with the subjective disagreement of Philosopher B with Philosopher A. This, too, exists only within the mind of Philosopher B or the minds of his partisan followers. Underneath such reciprocal subjective disagreements, there may be genuine disagreement. If there is, it will be objective in the sense that it is an issue which can exist identically in the mind of Philosopher A and Philosopher B, or in the mind of anyone else, whether a party to the issue or an observer of it.

Hence the anti-philosophical complaint that philosophers are forever disagreeing and disputing is in one sense right and in one sense wrong. Subjective disagreements and polemical refutations abound on the surface of philosophical discussion. But in the precise sense in which we have used the word “controversy,” to signify objective disagreements and rational debate, little if any controversy actually exists. The complaint that philosophers differ should not disturb us as much as the complaint that, though they differ, they seldom if ever disagree objectively. If we took that complaint seriously, I should think that, in philosophy’s defense, we would make every effort to show that, underneath the surface of subjective disagreement and polemical refutations, genuine controversy can be found, present at least implicitly if not actually.

This brings me to a second point which may need some amplification. I said a moment ago that the problem was to find the genuine disagreements in philosophy and the debate of issues that are squarely joined. But if these are only implicit in the records of philosophical discussion, then it will not be enough just to discover their latent presence. They must be made explicit. They must become actually present to our minds. Their actuality, which can be fruitful for the philosophical enterprise as a whole, must replace the actuality of subjective disagreement and polemical refutations, which are so futile.

To accomplish this, all the elements of philosophical controversy must be constructed. On the basis of the evidence provided by

what philosophers have written, we must construct the subjects of controversy by identifying the objects that two or more philosophers have in mind when they use such words as “freedom,” “law,” “matter,” “knowledge” or “God.” If we can identify the object that is common to two or more philosophers, we must construct the disagreements about it which are genuine issues, by formulating the questions about that object which they commonly understand and by formulating the incompatible answers they severally give. That done, we must construct the debate of these issues and relate the issues to one another in the light of the reasoning that connects one with another. If the matter under consideration is complex, and if the discussion of it is extensive and varied, we shall probably have to distinguish the several related subjects that are distinct subjects of controversy. The discussion of such subjects as freedom or law, for example, calls for the construction, not of a single controversy, but of a number of related controversies. By distinguishing different types of controversy as well as different types of issue, we must construct the form of the controversy as a whole.

Every construction we make is a formulation which can and must be checked against what the philosophers say and mean, though none is a formulation which, as stated, can be found in the writings of the philosophers. They are found by interpreting the intent of the language or, rather, the various languages that the philosophers use; and since their whole purpose is to state the elements of a controversy which can be agreed upon by philosophers who are parties to it, a thoroughly neutral language must be employed to formulate them. The neutrality of these constructions, both in language and thought, enables them to serve as the medium through which divergent philosophers can categorically agree and disagree with one another.

Let us suppose for a moment that the neutral formulations we are able to construct represent *with perfect accuracy* the controversy that is implicit in the philosophical discussion of a certain subject. If that is so, then all the participants in the discussion will accept our constructed identification of the subject of controversy; they will accept our formulation of the questions about that subject which raise the various issues; and they will accept our statement of the several positions on each issue, one of which is their own as a party to the issue.

By accepting these constructions, the disputants share with one another and with us, the observers, the truth about the controversy; and in the light of that truth, they see where and how they agree and disagree with one another about the matters under consideration.⁸ Jacques Maritain is of the opinion that it is only through the

medium of such neutral constructions that philosophers can be brought into agreement or disagreement. Without it, each remains in the world of his own thought and is conversant there with other philosophers only in the guise he gives them when he imports them into his own world.⁹

I said earlier that the method of constructing the elements of controversy is not a method used by philosophers to acquire knowledge of reality. As I have described the work of construction, I am sure you have gained the sense that those who engage in this endeavor are dealing with the results of philosophical work rather than doing such work themselves. But if the method or the work is not strictly philosophical, what is it?

To answer this question, we have appropriated the word “dialectic.” We say that the method and work of constructing philosophical controversies is dialectical. I shall not defend our appropriation of this word, which has been used in so many senses, none of which is ours. But I do wish to avoid misunderstanding. There is little danger that you would confuse the method we have developed—I think for the first time¹⁰—with Plato's dialectic, or Kant's or Hegel's. But because our dialectic is a method which deals with the diversity of opinions, and because it works only on the plane of second intentions, you might associate it with the method Aristotle expounds in his *Topics*.

No doubt it has some remote generic similarity to Aristotle's dialectic, on any one of the several theories of dialectic that Aristotelians attribute to Aristotle. Admitting this distant resemblance, I wish only to add that dialectic as a method of constructing controversies in a thoroughly neutral manner and for the sake of discovering the dialectical truth about the discussion of any philosophical subject, is not to be found anywhere in Aristotle's *Topics*. With this said, I hope I can use the word “dialectic” in what follows without being misunderstood.

Endnotes

¹ That work had its inception in a paper I delivered on “The Demonstration of Democracy” at the meeting of this Association in Washington in 1939

² *Thought*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 111, Winter, 1953-54. “The notion of a perennial philosophy,” Dr. Collins declares, “furnishes no basic directions about how to deal with philosophical differences.”

³ Dr. Collins raises the question whether all genuine philosophical disagreements are capable of being resolved by an act of synthesis in which the opposed positions are seen as half-truths which can be transformed and united as parts of the whole truth. His answer is that philosophers can contradict one another “genuinely and definitively” in ways “which do not turn out to be complementary poles of one complex truth.” Apart from the Hegelian theory of absolute idealism, he writes, “no necessary reasons are forthcoming for sublating all oppositions and treating them as partial expressions of a single whole or truth. A non-idealistic version of a perennial philosophy cannot settle disputes by claiming in principle that conflicting views cannot contradict each other and must find a place within the total frame-work. . . . The standpoint of philosophical pluralism has no strictly cogent grounds for claiming that the various Scholastic systems involve no irreconcilable differences and can all be reduced to analogical variations on a common doctrinal unity.” (Loc. cit., pp. 593-594).

⁴ The rare exceptions mentioned above would seem to be the great disputations of the thirteenth century and also, perhaps, the philosophical correspondence in which such men as Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz engaged with their critics in the seventeenth century. But a close examination of *such* correspondence raises some doubts about its furnishing us with an exception; and the volumes of *Disputed Questions* which reflect the mediaeval debates are, after all, *ex parte* reports of the issues and arguments.

⁵ The method of constructing philosophical controversies resembles the methods of empirical science mainly on its observational side and in its use of observed data as a source of hypothetical formulations and as basis for testing them. But unlike the scientific observation of natural phenomena, observation for the sake of constructing controversy must go to the historical record of philosophical thought. It is necessary, therefore, to distinguish such observation from the historian’s observation of the same body of materials. The one ignores entirely, while the other concentrates on, the temporal sequences and the human connections which constitute philosophy’s history. The observer interested in constructing controversies concentrates on the diversity which arises from a plurality of philosophies and regards that diversity, no matter how it has developed, as if it obtained at a single moment of time. On the non-historical character of such work, see Dr. Otto Bird’s forthcoming book, *Symbol and Icon, A Theory of the Liberal Arts*, Ch. 5.

⁶ In a memorandum which Jacques Maritain wrote in response to a

preliminary report of the Institute's work, he stressed the necessity of a neutral language, "immune from the doctrinal or systematic connotations which are inevitably present in the language of each particular philosopher." To be neutral, the constructed formulations, he said, must be "echoless," i.e., strictly limited to what is barely stated and deprived of any further doctrinal overtones or connotations. Just because such assertions or formulas, having no actual philosophic life of their own, are, so to speak, only in potency with regard to some philosophical wholeness or totality, every philosopher in the group concerned can subscribe to them; but in doing so each will infuse into it the connotations or overtones peculiar to his own entire doctrine, and foreign to the doctrines of his colleagues."

⁷ Anyone who has attended philosophical meetings is acquainted with the phenomena here described. At a joint meeting of the American Philosophical Association and the American Catholic Philosophical Association in New York in 1937, the subject proposed for discussion was dualism. Professor Sheldon of Yale and Professor Mercier of Harvard were supposed to debate this subject, but the one talked about the dualism of mind and body, while the other talked about the dualism of God and nature. Though the miscarriage of discussion is not always as flagrant as this, Edmund Husserl is nevertheless irrefutable in his observation that "there are plenty of philosophical meetings, but it is the philosophers who meet, not their philosophies." (*Meditations Cartesiennes*, Paris, 1931: p. 4) The failure of participants in discussion to join issue is not limited to philosophical meetings. The philosophical journals are full of such miscarriages, as, for example, the supposed "debate" between Thomists and Pragmatists in *Thought*, Vol. XXX, No. 117, Summer, 1955: pp. 199-230.

⁸ Men who disagree about the truth of this or that doctrine can, nevertheless, agree on the following points. (1) They can agree on the description of the subjects about which they disagree in various ways. (2) They can agree about the questions at issue on which they take opposite sides. (3) They can agree about the content of the issues—the statement of the positions that are opposed. (4) They may even be able to agree about the connection of one issue with another. Their agreement on all these matters still permits them to disagree categorically about what is true in fact; more than that, they could not disagree at all unless they were in agreement in at least the first three of these four ways.

⁹ In the memorandum already referred to (see fn. 6 above), Jacques Maritain insisted that agreements and disagreements are possible among philosophers *only through the medium of constructed formulations that are neutral, in language and intent*. Without this

medium as a *tertium quid*, it is difficult or impossible for philosophers to agree or disagree objectively with one another. “Every philosopher,” Maritain wrote, “understands his own assertions in the light of, or with the overtones peculiar to, his whole system. The entire doctrine reflects on every one of its parts.” This is the reason why it is difficult or impossible for philosophers, especially great ones, to achieve objective agreements or disagreements directly with one another.

¹⁰ The only definite anticipation of this method of construction with which I am acquainted appears in an essay by Professor Edwin Burt of Cornell University, entitled “The Generic Definition of Philosophic Terms” (*Philosophical Review*, Vol. LXII, No. 1, January, 1953) In this essay, Professor Burt proposes a method of identifying, in a neutral manner, the subjects of philosophical disagreements which take the form of opposed definitions.

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