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## LITTLE ERRORS IN THE BEGINNING

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### I

In his introduction to *De Ente et Essentia* St. Thomas Aquinas remarks that “a little error in the beginning leads to a great one in the end.” He is here rephrasing an observation made by Aristotle in *De Caelo*, I, 5: “The least initial deviation from the truth is multiplied later a thousandfold.”

The insight thus expressed is applicable to mathematics and the experimental sciences and, in fact, to all human enterprises as well as to philosophy, but I am going to concentrate upon its significance for philosophy. I am also going to try to show that many of

the problems characteristic of modern philosophical thought have resulted from the failure to correct little errors in the beginning.

Methodologically, the rule would appear to be a simple one to follow. When you disagree with a philosopher's conclusions, regard them as untenable, or find them repugnant to common sense, go back to his starting point and see if he has made a little error in the beginning. A striking example of the failure to follow this rule, and one with disastrous consequences for philosophy in the last 150 years, is to be found in Kant's response to Hume. Hume's skeptical conclusions and Hume's phenomenalism were unacceptable to Kant, even though they awoke him from his own dogmatic slumbers. But instead of looking for the little errors in the beginning that were made by Hume and dismissing, as unfounded, the Humean doctrines and conclusions that he found unacceptable, Kant felt it necessary to construct a vast piece of philosophical machinery, designed by him to produce conclusions of an opposite tenor.

The intricacy of the apparatus and the ingenuity of the design cannot help but evoke admiration, even from those who are suspicious of the sanity of the whole enterprise and who find it necessary to reject Kant's doctrines and conclusions as well as Hume's. Though they are opposite in tenor, they do not help us to get at the truth, which can only be found by correcting Hume's little errors in the beginning and making a fresh start from correct premises that lead to conclusions that are neither Hume's nor Kant's.

What I have just said about Kant in relation to Hume applies also to the whole tradition of British empirical philosophy following Locke and Hume. All of the philosophical puzzlements, paradoxes, and pseudo-problems that linguistic and analytical philosophy and therapeutic positivism have tried to eliminate, by the invention of philosophical devices designed for that purpose, would never have arisen in the first place if the little errors in the beginning made by Locke and Hume had been explicitly rejected instead of going unnoticed.

I will presently comment on these particular errors as well as discuss some others. But, first, I would like to call attention to the two ways in which little errors in the beginning occur. In some cases, they are made because something that needs to be known or understood has not yet been discovered or learned. Such mistakes are, of course, excusable, however regrettable they may be. In other cases, the errors are made as a result of culpable ignorance—ignorance of an essential point, an insight or distinction, that has already been

discovered and expounded.

It is mainly in this second way that modern philosophers have made their little errors in the beginning. When they are made in this way and then perpetuated by the same ignorance that accounts for their origin, they are ugly monuments to failures in education—failures that have one or both of the following sources: on the one hand, corruptions in the tradition of learning, like the corrupt and decadent scholasticism of the 15th and 16th centuries, the effects of which are so evident in the writings of Descartes, Hobbes, and Locke;<sup>1</sup> on the other hand, an attitude of antagonism toward or even contempt for the past—for the achievements of those who have come before.

Both of these causes are operative today. Contemporary philosophers are, for the most part, vastly ignorant of the great works in the philosophical tradition prior to the 17th century. Many students of philosophy in our universities, graduate as well as undergraduate, spend most, if not all, of their time, reading books and periodical articles written in this century, for the most part limited to the last forty or fifty years. They may have to pass examinations in the history of philosophy, but this seldom requires them to make a thorough study of the texts of even 17th and 18th century writers, much less anything earlier than that. How, then, can we expect a correction of the little errors in the beginning that have beset the whole of modern philosophy, especially those errors which have resulted from an ignorance of insights and distinctions that were once known and expounded but which are no longer taught and cannot be learned by the reading of modern or contemporary works?

## II

Within the compass of this short essay, I cannot do more than indicate some of these little errors and comment briefly on their consequences. Such an abbreviated treatment may give the impression that the story of modern philosophy is nothing but the story of these errors and their consequences. To forestall that impression, I would like to call attention to the fact that in my book, *The Conditions of Philosophy*, and elsewhere in my writings, I have noted that ancient and mediaeval philosophy had their share of little errors, and that modern philosophy has advanced in important ways

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<sup>1</sup> Though the 15th and 16th centuries were the centuries of Cajetan and Jean Poincot, their work exercised little influence on current scholastic thought, and none outside it.

beyond ancient and mediaeval thought.<sup>2</sup> However, in the pre-modern periods of philosophy, respect rather than contempt for one's predecessors was the order of the day; hence errors of the culpable sort—the sort I am mainly concerned with in this essay—characterize modern thought to an extent unparalleled in earlier periods.

In this section, I am going to deal, first, with errors in logic and in the theory of knowledge and of truth; and then, second, with errors in practical philosophy—in ethics and politics. These matters I have treated at length in *The Conditions of Philosophy*,<sup>3</sup> *The Time of Our Lives*,<sup>4</sup> and *The Common Sense of Politics*.<sup>5</sup> In Section III to follow, I am going to deal somewhat more extensively with an error that work in progress at the Institute for Philosophical Research has convinced me can be regarded, in terms of its effect on modern thought, as the single most disastrous error; and I will also touch on a number of other errors closely connected with this basic error in the psychology of cognition.

1. Leibniz and Locke laid the groundwork for Kant's famous distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments. According to Locke, propositions are either trifling or instructive. They are trifling—mere tautologies—either when they state identities (e.g., “a law is a law,” or “right is right and wrong is wrong”) or when the predicate is contained in the meaning of the subject as that is defined (e.g., “lead is a metal,” or “gold is fusible”). While true, such propositions are uninformative: they add nothing to our knowledge. In addition, such truth as they possess requires no support from other propositions offering evidence or reasons, as compared with informative propositions that do require such support.

It is the second type of trifling or uninformative proposition that Kant, as before him Leibniz, treats as an analytic judgment—one in which the predicate is contained in the definition of the subject. In contrast, synthetic judgments are, for Kant, expressed by propositions in which the predicates lie entirely outside the meaning of the subjects as defined. The distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments being, for Kant, exhaustive, he is then confronted

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<sup>2</sup> See *op. cit.*, New York, 1955: Chapters 14-18.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* See pp. 137-140.

<sup>4</sup> New York, 1970. See Chapters 9-11, 13-14, 16.

<sup>5</sup> New York, 1971.

by the following dilemma: either all synthetic judgments are *a posteriori*, requiring the support of evidence or reasons that can be stated in other propositions; or some are *a priori* and have certitude in and of themselves.

I need not recount in detail all the steps in the controversy about synthetic judgments *a priori* which have eventuated in the currently prevailing opinion that none exist, and that the only tenable distinction is between verbal truths or mere tautologies (Locke's two types of trifling propositions and Kant's analytic judgments), on the one hand, and truths about matters or fact or real existence (Locke's instructive propositions and Kant's synthetic judgments *a posteriori*), on the other. This is accompanied by the now generally accepted assertion that the latter are always conclusions that must be supported by evidence and reasoning. They cannot, therefore, have incorrigible certitude, because the supporting propositions are always themselves synthetic and need similar support. Hence, if an infinite regress is to be avoided, any argument for the truth of a synthetic proposition must either rest ultimately on postulates, which can always be denied, or at least on evidence and reasons that are intrinsically questionable.

The little error in the beginning, made by Locke and Leibniz, perpetuated by Kant, and leading to the repudiation of any non-verbal or non-tautological truth having incorrigible certitude, consists in starting with a dichotomy instead of a trichotomy—a twofold instead of a threefold distinction of types of truth. In addition to merely verbal statements which, as tautologies, are uninformative and need no support beyond the rules of language, and in addition to informative statements which need support and certification, either from experience or by reasoning, there is a third class of statements which are non-tautological or informative, on the one hand, and are also indemonstrable or self-evidently true, on the other. These are the statements that Euclid called "common notions," that Aristotle called "axioms" or "first principles," and that mediaeval thinkers called "propositions *per se nota*."

One example will suffice to make this clear—the axiom or self-evident truth that a finite whole is greater than any of its parts. This proposition states our understanding of the relation between a finite whole and its parts. It is not a statement about the word "whole" or the word "part" but rather about our understanding of wholes and parts and their relation. All of the operative terms in the proposition are indefinable. We cannot express our understanding of a whole without reference to our understanding of its parts and our understanding that it is greater than any of its parts. We

cannot express our understanding of parts without reference to our understanding of wholes and our understanding that a part is less than the whole of which it is a part.

When our understanding of an object that is indefinable (e.g., a whole) involves our understanding of another object that is indefinable (e.g., a part), and of the relation between them, that understanding is expressed in a self-evident proposition which is not trifling, uninformative, or analytic, in Locke's sense or Kant's, for no definitions are involved. Nor is it a synthetic *a priori* judgment in Kant's sense, even though it has incorrigible certitude; and it is certainly not synthetic *a posteriori* since, being intrinsically indemonstrable, it cannot be supported by statements offering empirical evidence or reasons.

The contemporary denial that there are any indisputable statements which are not merely verbal or tautological, together with the contemporary assertion that all non-tautological statements require extrinsic support or certification and that none has incorrigible certitude, is therefore falsified by the existence of a third type of statement, exemplified by the axiom or self-evident truth that a finite whole is greater than any of its parts, or that a part is less than the finite whole to which it belongs. It could as readily be exemplified by the self-evident truth that the good is the desirable, or that the desirable is the good—a statement that is known to be true entirely from an understanding of its terms, both of which are indefinables. One cannot say what the good is except by reference to desire, or what desire is except by reference to the good. The understanding of either involves the understanding of the other, and the understanding of both, each in relation to the other, is expressed in a proposition *per se nota*, i.e., self-evident or known to be true as soon as its terms are understood.

Such propositions are neither analytic nor synthetic in the modern sense of that dichotomy; for the predicate is neither contained in the definition of the subject, nor does it lie entirely outside the meaning of the subject. Axioms or self-evident truths are, furthermore, truths about objects understood, objects that can have instantiation in reality, and so they are not merely verbal. They are not *a priori* because they are based on experience, as all our knowledge and understanding is; yet they are not empirical or *a posteriori* in the sense that they can be falsified by experience or require empirical investigation for their confirmation. The little error in the beginning, which consists in a non-exhaustive dichotomy mistakenly regarded as exhaustive, is corrected when we substitute for it a trichotomy that distinguishes (i) merely verbal tautologies, (ii)

statements of fact that require empirical support and can be empirically falsified, (iii) axiomatic statements, expressing indemonstrable truths of understanding which, while based upon experience, do not require empirical support and cannot be empirically falsified.<sup>6</sup>

Before leaving this subject, I would like to comment briefly on an error that is ancient and mediaeval, not modern, in origin. It is the ancient and mediaeval conception of what the Greeks called “episteme” and the Latins “scientia.” The error consists in the oversimplified view that a science is an organized body of knowledge which consists solely of axioms, or self-evident truths, and propositions that can be rigorously demonstrated by deduction from them as conclusions, using only axioms as the ultimate premises or first principles. No such body of knowledge exists, either in the sphere of mathematics or in that of philosophy, neither of which involve empirical investigation of any sort; *a fortiori*, no such body of knowledge exists in the sphere of what we now call “empirical science.” While this mistaken conception of science is stated by both Aristotle and Aquinas, it is not put into practice by them when they expound their own philosophical doctrines. Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, for example, is not set forth as a deductive system in which conclusions are deductively developed from and demonstrated by a small number of axioms or self-evident truths that function as its first principles. Nor is the doctrine of *De Ente et Essentia* expounded in that way. The actual exemplification of this erroneous conception of science is to be found only in the works of modern philosophers—in the way in which Descartes and Spinoza attempt to expound their doctrines as deductive systems: and in Kant’s illusions about Euclidean geometry as the model of deductive science.

2. Closely connected with the little error about analytic and synthetic judgments as an exhaustive distinction is another little error that has the most far-reaching consequences for moral philosophy in modern times, resulting in the total abandonment of normative ethics by those who treat all statements about good and bad, or right and wrong, as non-cognitive or emotive. This error consists in the failure to distinguish two radically different modes of truth.

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<sup>6</sup> It would be a further mistake to regard this trichotomy as exhaustive. There are, in addition, (iv) postulates or assumptions that, while not self-evident, are asserted without proof or support of any kind and can, therefore, also be denied; and (v) statements, expressing truths of understanding which, not being axiomatic and indemonstrable, can be supported by reasoning.

If all truth is of the same sort, involving some correspondence between what is asserted and what is the case, then only descriptive propositions (or “is-statements”) can be either true or false. Normative propositions (or “ought-statements”) obviously cannot be either true or false; for, in the first place, the statement that something ought or ought not to be done cannot correspond with what is or is not the case; and, in the second place, an ought-statement cannot be established as true on the basis of a series of is-statements that are true by virtue of their correspondence with what is the case; nor can ought-statements, when categorical, be reduced to is-statements. Since normative propositions cannot be either true or false, they must be interpreted in some other way, and the criteria for accepting or rejecting them must be entirely different from the criteria applicable to statements that claim to be knowledge.

With obvious and significant exceptions, such as Jacques Maritain, not a single modern writer in the field of moral philosophy is cognizant of Aristotle’s and Aquinas’s distinction between speculative and practical truth (i.e., the mode of truth appropriate to descriptive propositions or is-statements, on the one hand, and the mode of truth appropriate to normative propositions or ought-statements, on the other). If, instead of making this little error in the beginning, due to ignorance, they had recognized that a statement about what ought to be done can be true or false by virtue of its conformity or non-conformity with right desire, thus having a mode of truth quite different from the truth or falsity of descriptive statements by virtue of their conformity or non-conformity with what really is the case, non-cognitive or emotive ethics might not have come into being as the only solution of the problem of what to do about statements that are not about matters of fact and do not describe any objects whatsoever by saying what they are or are not.

Avoidance of that error would not, of course, have been sufficient by itself to save moral philosophy in modern times from all its serious mistakes. Reference to right desire indicates another little error that need not have been made if modern writers had been cognizant of the distinction between natural and conscious, or elicited, desire. In the absence of this distinction, it is impossible to differentiate between the real and the apparent good—the former, that which ought to be consciously desired because it is good and because its goodness consists in its satisfying a natural desire (or need); the latter, that which is regarded as good only because it is consciously desired (or wanted), whether or not it satisfies a natural need. Right desire, then, consists in consciously desiring what one ought to desire—that which is really good because it satisfies a natural desire.



As I have already pointed out, it is self-evident or axiomatic that the good is the desirable and the desirable the good. But the desirable can be either (i) that which ought to be desired whether or not it is in fact desired, or (ii) that which is in fact desired whether or not it ought to be desired. So the good can be either (i) that which is really good because it is naturally desired (needed), whether or not it is consciously desired (wanted) or (ii) that which appears to be good because it is consciously desired (wanted) whether or not it is naturally desired (needed). Given these two distinctions, the one with regard to the desirable, the other with regard to the good, the axiom that the good is the desirable generates another self-evident truth, namely, that we ought to desire everything that is really good for us and nothing else. Desiring that which ought to be desired because it is really good is right desire; and any ought-statement then becomes true if the desire that it prescribes conforms to this standard of right desire.

An understanding of the foregoing would have saved modern thought from all its fruitless discussion of the so-called “naturalistic fallacy,” as well as from the non-cognitive or emotive interpretation of normative statements or value-judgments. But still another little error made in modern thought must be corrected to save it from another blind alley in ethics—that of naturalism, which tries to reduce all value judgments to statements of fact, all normative judgments to descriptions. This error consists in a failure to recognize a distinction between the two senses in which an end can be proposed as the ultimate or final goal and as the criterion for judging the moral value of anything that is proposed as a means.

This distinction is best exemplified by the difference between temporal happiness, on the one hand, and eternal beatitude, on the other. When eternal beatitude is proposed by Aquinas as a final end, it is also conceived as a terminal end—an end that can be reached and in which, when reached, one comes to rest. But when temporal happiness is proposed by Aristotle as a final end, it is not conceived as a terminal end, for in the course of this temporal life there is no achievement or any state of being in which we can come to rest; there is no moment of which we are compelled to say “Stay, thou art so fair!” Temporal happiness is a final end only in a purely normative sense. It is that sum of real goods or *totum bonum* which can be achieved only successively and only in the course of a whole life, not at any one moment nor even at any one period of one’s life. Thus conceived, temporal happiness cannot be enjoyed as a psychological experience; it is not an end that can be reached and rested in.

Failing to understand this distinction between a final end that is terminal and one that is purely normative, and mistakenly supposing that a final end must be terminal, the naturalist denies that there is any final end in this life. In consequence, every end must be regarded as a means to some further end; all normative judgments become hypothetical rather than categorical; and it is in this way that they are all reduced to statements of fact. That something either does or not serve as a means to something else as an end is a matter of fact; if, then, everything is a means to something else, and nothing is an end itself, then all statements about means to be chosen are hypothetical (if you wish to attain a certain end, then choose these means); and all statements about ends to be sought must be converted into statements about them as means to further ends.

Two other errors closely connected with the one just mentioned consist in mistakes concerning happiness—mistakes which, in my judgment, could have been avoided by a careful reading of Aristotle's *Ethics*. One is the mistake of conceiving happiness as the highest good or *summum bonum*; for the highest good is only one good in an order or set of goods, and no one good can be identified with happiness, for then one could achieve happiness while still lacking many other goods, in which case happiness could not be a normative final end. Having it, one might still desire other things. To be a final end that is normative, not terminal, happiness must be conceived as the *totum bonum*, the whole of real goods successively achieved in the course of a lifetime, not simultaneously possessed at any one moment.

The second error is the mistake of conceiving happiness in psychological instead of in ethical terms, as a hedonic state of satisfaction, enjoyed at one moment and not at another, instead of as a purely normative goal that has no existence at all as an object of experience or as a state of being that can be enjoyed. Making this error, Kant imposes upon all subsequent thought the false diremption between a deontological and a teleological ethics—the one an ethics of categorical oughts or obligations, the other a merely pragmatic or utilitarian calculation of means and ends, or desires and satisfactions.

Avoiding all these little errors that beset modern thought in the field of ethics, a sound moral philosophy not only can be, but also must be, both deontological and teleological. Happiness as the sum of all real goods is the normative final end that ought to be pursued as the object of right desire, and everything else is good in propor-

tion as it serves as a means constitutive or productive of this end—a good human life as a whole.

One of the errors already mentioned has consequences for political philosophy as well as for ethics. It is the failure to distinguish between natural needs and conscious wants, together with the related failure to distinguish between real and apparent goods. The only basis for natural rights lies in natural needs. A man has, by nature, a right to that which, by nature, he needs for the fulfillment of his categorical obligation to lead a good human life. When I know what is really good for me, because it answers to my natural needs, I also know what is really good for everyone else, because they are of the same nature; and it is thus that I know what every man can claim as his natural right.

It is precisely this understanding of natural rights that is lacking in modern political philosophy. The absence of it leads to all kinds of philosophical contortions and confections in contemporary efforts to deal with the problems of justice, as witness the recent book by Professor John Rawls on this subject.

Another little error should be mentioned. It occurs in J. S. Mill's *Utilitarianism* and is not noticed by many of his followers. On the one hand, Mill proposes that the individual should pursue his own happiness as an ultimate end. On the other hand, he also proposes that each of us should work for the general happiness, or the greatest good of the greatest number, this too as an ultimate end. But it is impossible for there to be two ultimate ends not ordered to one another; and if one is subordinated to the other, then both are not ultimate ends.

This error on Mill's part might have been avoided if he had known and understood the distinction between *bonum commune hominis* and *bonum commune communitatis*, and their relation to one another. Because each man as a person is an end not a means, and in relation to human beings the state is a means not an end, the good that is common to and shared by all men *as men* (the *bonum commune hominis*) is the one and only ultimate end or final goal in this life. The good that is common to and shared by all men as members of the political community (the *bonum commune communitatis*) is an end served by the organized community as a whole, and a means to the individual happiness of each man and of all. The individual by himself cannot work *directly* for the general happiness or the happiness of all; he can do so, *indirectly*, only by working with others for the good of the political community, which is itself a means to the happiness of each and everyone, including himself.

### III.

Of all the little errors in the beginning that have plagued modern philosophy since its start, the most serious is the one that was made in the psychology of cognition. The most compact expression of it is to be found in the Introduction to John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. The error originated with Descartes, not with Locke, but it was the influence of Locke's psychology on Berkeley and Hume, and through Hume on Kant, that led to all the many times multiplied errors that, as Aristotle and Aquinas warned, spring from a little error in the beginning.

In the last paragraph (#8) of his Introduction, Locke writes:

*What "Idea" stands for . . .* Before I proceed to what I have thought on this subject, I must here in the entrance beg pardon of my reader for the frequent use of the word *idea*, which he will find in the following treatise. It being the term which, I think, serves best to stand for whatsoever is the *object* of the understanding when a man thinks, I have used it to express whatever is meant by *phantasm*, *notion*, *species*, or whatever it is which the mind can be *employed about in thinking* ... I presume it will be easily granted me that there are such *ideas* in men's minds; every one is conscious of them in himself; and men's words and actions will satisfy him that they are in others. Our first inquiry then shall be, how they come into the mind.

A careful reading of this paragraph will disclose a number of points.

(1) It is evident that Locke went to school at Oxford with tutors who were scholastics, for it must have been thus that he acquired such terms as "phantasm" and "species" and learned that they stood for factors in the cognitive process. Either he was a poor student or his scholastic instructors were poor representatives of that tradition, for it is also clear from the passage quoted that he did not learn the most important things that the tradition could have taught him about the cognitive process.

(2) It is evident that Locke uses the word "idea" to stand for something private: the ideas in one man's mind are not identical with the ideas in another man's mind. Each man has his own. Each of us is conscious of his own, and can directly apprehend only his own ideas. Each of us must infer from their speech and actions that other men have ideas in their minds too.

(3) What each of us directly apprehends—the objects of our apprehension, says Locke—are always and only our own ideas. But Locke also implies that these ideas come into our minds from without. As Book II of the *Essay* makes amply clear, the ideas in our minds, the objects we directly apprehend, are caused by things outside our mind—real existences of one sort or another that we cannot directly apprehend. In fact, as many passages reveal, Locke believes in the real existence of Newton’s world of bodies in motion, ultimately composed of imperceptible atomic particles. It is the action of these on our corporeal organs that somehow produces the ideas that are the objects of our minds whenever we are engaged in thinking.

(4) As the passage quoted indicates, and as the rest of the *Essay* fully substantiates, Locke makes no distinction between the sensitive powers and the intellectual powers, merging them into one cognitive faculty, which he calls “understanding” or “mind.” Though he uses the term “abstract idea” instead of “concept,” an abstract idea for Locke is a product of the same faculty that produces what others would call “sensations” and “perceptions” or “phantasms.” If he had used the word “concept” instead of “species” in the paragraph quoted, we would read him as saying that both phantasms (or percepts) and concepts are *ideas*, without any differentiation between them.

The points made in (3) and (4) above reveal the presence here of two little errors, not one. The first is the error of regarding ideas as the objects that we directly apprehend when we are conscious—thinking or dreaming. The second is the error of failing to distinguish between sense and intellect as cognitive powers which, while they are cooperative in the cognitive process, do not operate in the same way and do not contribute in the same way to whatever knowledge we are able to achieve. These two errors together led to the nominalism of Berkeley and Hume; to the idealism of Berkeley and the phenomenalism of Hume; to Kant’s efforts to extricate philosophy from these horrors, by trying to circumvent them with an ingeniously confected theory of mind instead of by correcting the little errors from which they arose; to all the riddles and perplexities of later empiricism concerning the subjective and the objective, concerning our knowledge of the external world, concerning the logical construction of “objects” that we cannot directly apprehend from the sense-data that we do directly apprehend, concerning the referential meaning of any words that do not have directly apprehended items, such as sense-data, for their referents; and so on.

To avoid the solipsism that is inherent in Locke's premises, along with the extreme skepticism which Hume sees as a conclusion from those premises but which he tries to avoid, it is necessary to regard ideas—the only objects we directly apprehend—as somehow *representations* of real existences that we cannot directly apprehend. Both Locke and Hume, each locked within the world of his own ideas, have no hesitation in talking about a world of things that are not ideas—an independent world of nature or reality that would exist and be whatever it is regardless of the existence of the human mind and its cognitive acts. How regarding the private ideas in my own mind as both its *directly apprehended objects* and also as *representations of things that cannot be directly apprehended* enables me to have knowledge of or even a rational belief in an independent world of real existences is a mystery that has remained unsolved. And the futile attempts to solve it have produced a variety of other embarrassments and perplexities that have riddled philosophy in the 19th and 20th centuries.

In *The Great Ideas Today* for 1973, there is an essay by Professor W. T. Jones on modern philosophy which begins by calling attention to the little error about ideas as both objects of the mind and representations of things, and which traces all the consequences of this error in the serpentine turnings and twistings of modern thought to extricate itself from its traces. Professor Jones, I must add, fails to suggest how the error could have been avoided in the first place. I quote the following paragraphs from this essay's opening pages.

When Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* was published in 1781, the dominant philosophical school was a form of metaphysical and epistemological dualism. According to this way of thinking there are two sorts of entities in the universe: minds and material objects. A mind knows objects (and other minds) by means of mental states (variously called 'ideas,' 'representations,' 'impressions,') that are caused by these objects and resemble them. Despite differences on many points, the Lockeians and Cartesians agreed that the mind is directly acquainted only with its own states; that is, its ideas are its only means of access to the outside world.

The difficulty with this view, as Hume pointed out, is that if the mind knows only its own states, its own states are all that it knows . . . Similarly, if we have access only to ideas, we can compare ideas with each other but never with the external reality they claim to represent. Indeed, we can never even know

that an external world, or that other minds than ours, exist.

Professor Jones then goes on to show that Kant, instead of correcting the errors made by Descartes and Locke, and instead of rejecting the problems raised by Hume, all of which flowed from those errors, tried to circumvent Hume's conclusions by philosophical inventions specifically designed for this purpose. Post-Kantian thought, both in the 19th and 20th centuries, is not only a record of diverse reactions to Kant's inventions but also a record of self-defeating attempts to solve problems that would not be problems at all if the errors initially made by Descartes, Locke, and Hume had been corrected.

From that false start modern philosophy has never recovered. Like a man who, floundering in quicksand, compounds his difficulties by struggling to extricate himself, Kant and his successors have multiplied the difficulties and perplexities of modern philosophy by the very strenuousness—and even ingenuity—of their efforts to extricate themselves from the muddle left in their path by Descartes, Locke, and Hume. The only way out of the debacle of modern philosophy is to go back to its beginning and try to make a fresh start.

That fresh start involves an alternative to the error committed by Descartes and Locke. We can find that alternative compactly expressed in a single paragraph of the *Summa Theologiae*. In q. 85, a. 2 of Part I Aquinas rejects the error of those who, in the objections, say that sensible and intelligible species are *that which* we perceive and understand. On the contrary, he writes: “The intelligible species is to the intellect what the sensible image is to sense. But the sensible image is not what is perceived but rather that by which sense perceives. Therefore the intelligible species is not what is understood but that by which the intellect understands.”

The simple distinction between that which is apprehended and that by which it is apprehended (the *quod* and the *quo* of apprehension) corrects the error of Descartes and Locke. It should be noted at once that I am here referring only to the first act of the mind—its percepts, memories, imaginations, and concepts, not to the second act of the mind—its perceptual and conceptual judgments. The first act of the mind, in which sense and intellect cooperate while remaining distinct, is that of simple apprehension, in which there is neither truth nor falsity, and hence no knowledge in the strict sense of that term. The second act of the mind, involving the composition and division of judgments, is subject to the criteria of truth and falsity. It is only here that we can have knowledge and do have it

when our judgments are validated as true.

It is not enough to see that the distinction between the *quo* and *quod* of simple apprehension removes the error made by Descartes and Locke in regarding ideas as the objects apprehended and also as *representations* of the things about which we seek to make true judgments and thus come to know. It is also necessary to understand what is involved in rigorously adhering to the view that ideas (percepts, memories, imaginations, and concepts) are always and only that by which we apprehend, never that which we apprehend, when our sensitive and intellectual faculties perform their first acts, usually in conjunction.

The first thing which must be understood is that the products of our mind's first acts—its percepts, memories, imaginations, and concepts—are totally unexperienceable, uninspectible, unapprehensible. We can never experience, inspect, or examine them; for they are always and only that by which we apprehend whatever it is that we do apprehend, and never that which we apprehend. For the moment I am going to use the word “object” to name that which we do apprehend, thus sharply distinguishing objects from ideas, ideas being that by which we apprehend objects. I will presently have something further to say about objects of apprehension in relation to the order of real existences concerning which we seek to make true judgments and have knowledge. However, I must call attention at once to the negative point that the objects of the mind's apprehensions are in no sense representations of the things we know.

In the order of things sensible, through our sensitive powers and their first acts, we experience perceived objects but never the percepts whereby we perceive them; remembered objects, but never the memories by which we remember them; imagined or imaginary objects, but never the images by which we imagine them. In the order of things intelligible, through our intellectual powers and their first acts, we apprehend objects of thought but never the concepts whereby we think them. The objects thus presented to us by the first acts of the mind exist intentionally as presented, whether or not they exist in reality and whether or not, when they do exist in reality, they exist in the same way as that in which they exist intentionally as intended by ideas—the intentions of the mind.

In the order of things sensible, the objects we experience by the acts of our sensitive powers may have existed but no longer exist (as is the case with things remembered); or may have no real existence at any time (as is the case with purely imaginary objects, or



objects produced by hallucinosis). So, in the order of things intelligible, the objects of thought, being universal and so having no real existence as such, may or may not have instantiation in the realm of real existences; or they may be of such a character that they cannot have instantiation in reality (as is the case with *entia rationis*).

The second thing which must be understood is that a trichotomy of ideas (the *quo*'s of apprehension), objects (the *quod*'s of apprehension), and things (the *quod*'s of knowledge) replaces the dichotomy of ideas (the *quod*'s of apprehension) and things (the *quod*'s of knowledge). In the trichotomy as well as in the dichotomy ideas are mental existences—completely private, each man having his own. But in the trichotomy, as not in the dichotomy, the objects of apprehension, not being ideas, are public, not private.

Two or more men, as ordinary discourse amply confirms, can talk about one and the same object which is before their minds because each has an idea that presents it to him. The ideas in the minds of two men are two mental existences which, while two existentially, are one in intention; and so the two ideas are that by which the two men intend one and the same object as an object of discourse. Furthermore, the object intended by the two ideas does not, like the ideas, have mental existence, for then it would be the same as an idea. The mode of existence of the object is intentional, neither mental nor real.

An entity may have both intentional and real existence; it may have intentional existence without having real existence or even without being able to have real existence; or it may have real existence without having intentional existence. But when, as in the case of veridical perceptions, one and the same entity has both real and intentional existence, the object that the mind apprehends (which has intentional existence as presented to the mind by a percept) is not a representation of the thing (which has real existence whether or not it is perceived). It is the *thing-as-perceived*. Similarly, in the intellectual order, the universal object of thought that the mind apprehends (having intentional existence as presented to the mind by a concept) is not a representation of an existent universal. When that universal object has instantiation in reality, it is the *thing-understood-as-being-of-a-certain-kind*.

#### IV

I have said enough to indicate what is involved in making a fresh start by rigorously adhering to the distinction between that which is

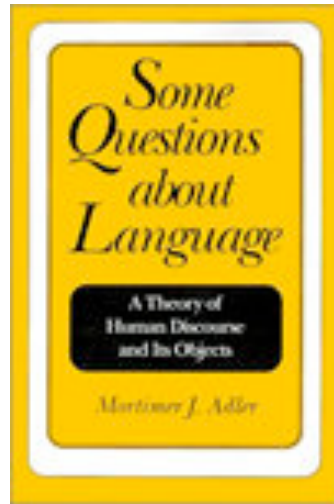
apprehended (objects) and that by which they are apprehended (ideas); the distinction between that which is apprehended and has intentional existence (objects) and that which is apprehensible and has real existence (things); the distinction between apprehension and knowledge (the first and second acts of the mind); and the distinction between sense and intellect (the apprehension of singular and universal objects). All of these distinctions were lost or obscured in the tradition of modern philosophy that began with Descartes and Locke, giving rise to the consequences to which I have called attention.

I do not mean to suggest that the philosophical development that would follow from this fresh start would be without difficulties or even certain embarrassments of its own. Some of the problems to be solved will be noted by a perceptive reader of the brief statement that I have made about what is involved in the new departure. There are others that may not be so apparent.


One, for example, that should have been observed is the problem whether, even in the so-called reflexive acts of understanding, ideas are objects of apprehension. Aquinas appears to think that the intelligible species, which “is the form by which the intellect understands,” may also be, secondarily, an object that it understands reflexively. When the intellect turns back upon itself, he writes, “it understands both its own act of understanding and the species by which it understands. Thus the intelligible species is that which is understood secondarily, but that which is primarily understood is the thing, of which the intelligible species is the likeness” (*loc. cit.*). This, I think, is an error and one that can be avoided by distinguishing two ways in which a universal object of thought (*not* the concept whereby we apprehend it) can be considered: in the first intention, *either as instantiated or as capable of instantiation*; in the second intention, *either in and of itself, without regard to instantiation, or as incapable of instantiation*.

Problems that may not have become apparent in the brief statement that I have made concern the threefold distinction in modes of being (mental, intentional, and real existence); the peculiar character of the identity between thing and object, which consists in a special type of existential inseparability; the difference between things as having an existence independent of mind in general, objects as having an existence that is not independent of mind in general but only of individual minds, and ideas as having an existence that is dependent on individual minds; the status of *entia rationis*; and, most difficult of all, the relation between the first and second acts of the mind in the case of veridical perceptions through which the

object perceived is known at once to be an entity that has real as well as intentional existence.



Work that Dr. John Deely and I have been doing for some years now at the Institute for Philosophical Research gives us reasonable assurance that all these problems can be satisfactorily solved, by taking advantage of distinctions, insights, and formulations explicitly achieved in the tradition of Aristotle and Aquinas, especially in the contributions of Cajetan and Jean Poincot, and by developing points that are either not touched on or are only implicitly there. The results of our work will be published by the Institute under

the title, *Some Questions about Language*. 

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## WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

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