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Part 1 of 3

I. Introduction

This is a lecture on philosophy and its history in the intellectual tradition of the West. Its relevance is twofold: in one way, *to you*—students at St. John's College reading the great works of Western philosophy included in the St. John's Program.

In another way *to me*, looking back on my life as a student of philosophy, a teacher of philosophy, and a writer of philosophical books.

A. *To you*, insofar as it throws some light on

1. The relation of the modern books in philosophy to their ancient and mediaeval predecessors—the relation of Western thought from Plato through Aquinas to what comes after: from the 17th century on.

2. The relation of philosophy to mathematics and science, on the one hand, and to religion and theology, on the other.

B. As for the significance of this lecture for me, you can judge that for yourself when I confess and also explain my profound commitment to the philosophy of Aristotle and, in consequence thereof, my equally profound distaste for almost all of modern philosophical thought.

1. I have recently written and published my autobiography, in which, in Chapter 14, I summed up the result for me of a life-long study of philosophy, and therein explained my discipleship to Aristotle.

2. One other occasion caused me to take stock of my philosophical views. That was when, in 1975, I was awarded the Aquinas Medal by the American Catholic Philosophical Association. (I should add that I was both surprised and shocked to discover that I was one of a very few Aristotelians and Thomists in attendance at the meeting I addressed in response to being presented the medal.)

C. What I have to say about the history of philosophy in talking to you as students in the St. John's Program will, I hope, be helpful to your understanding of the philosophical books you have read or will read.

D. What I have to say about my own philosophical commitments, after more than fifty years of reading those same books, may not encourage you to read them all, but it should at least challenge you to examine them in a new light. I hope that it does.

E. I shall proceed as follows:

First, I will try to tell you, very briefly, how I view the development of philosophical thought in the West—view it from a procedural point of view; that is, in terms of philosophy's understanding of itself and its relation to other disciplines in each of the three great epochs of Western history—ancient, mediaeval, and modern.

Second, I will try to give you my appraisal of the extraordinary contribution to philosophical thought that was made in antiquity by Plato and Aristotle, a contribution that was enhanced by mediaeval thought.

In my judgment, the whole of modern philosophy, from the 17th century on, has added little to the wisdom of the ancients. Far from adding a body of new truths, it has lost or obscured truths that had been discovered earlier.

Third, and lastly, I will try to explain why modern thought has been a loss rather than a gain, why it has not advanced the pursuit of philosophical truth, but multiplied the number of errors to be avoided.

II. The Condition of Philosophy in the Three Epochs of Western Thought

Let me repeat at the outset the sense in which this historical survey is methodological or procedural rather than substantive.

1. I propose to deal with the history of philosophy in terms of philosophy's understanding of itself in different epochs and also its various misunderstandings of its own nature, tasks, methods, limitations.

2. With one or two exceptions I propose to tell the story of philosophy's checkered career in terms of the soundness of its procedures at various times and in terms of the adequacy and correctness of philosophy's understanding of itself, without regard to the truth or falsity in substance of its doctrines or theories.

A. The condition of philosophy in antiquity

3. Philosophy made a good start at its very beginning, in three respects:

a. The Greek philosophers managed to pose, and to pose quite clearly, many of the fundamental questions of philosophy. The fecundity of the Platonic dialogues lies in this: they raise so many of the basic questions—questions about the nature of things, about being and becoming, about the one and the many, about matter and spirit, about the divine, about knowledge and truth, about language, about the senses and the intellect, about ideas, about virtue and the virtues, about justice and happiness, about the state and the individual.

(1) These questions, at the very beginning of philosophy's career, indicated its scope and character as a pursuit of truth, both speculative and practical.

(2) Neither the refinement of these questions in later periods of thought nor the later addition of questions that open up new lines of philosophical inquiry should be allowed to diminish the magnificence of the Platonic achievement, which richly deserves the tribute paid by Alfred North Whitehead when he said that the whole of European thought can be read as a series of footnotes to the dialogues of Plato.

b. The Greek philosophers—here Plato to a lesser extent, and to a much greater extent Aristotle—also managed to lay down the lines of correct procedure in many of the respects that are essential to the proper conduct of the philosophical enterprise.

(1) The way in which Aristotle carefully considers the questions raised by his predecessors or contemporaries, and takes their opinions into account, is an amazingly clear first approximation to what is meant by the conduct of philosophy as a public, rather than a private, enterprise.

(2) Consider these two statements by Aristotle, which eloquently express his sense of philosophy as a cooperative enterprise.

(a) The first is from the *Metaphysics*, Book II, Chapter 1:

The investigation of the truth is in one way hard, in another easy. An indication of this is found in the fact that no one is able to attain the truth adequately, while, on the other hand, we do not collectively fail, but everyone says something true about the nature of things, and while individually we contribute little or nothing to the truth, by the union of all a considerable amount is amassed.

(b) The second is from *On the Soul*, Book I, Chapter 2:

It is necessary to call into council the views of our predecessors, in order that we may profit by whatever is sound in their thought and avoid their errors.

(c) Pondering these statements, it is difficult not to attribute to Aristotle a conception of philosophical knowledge as testable *doxa* (certifiable opinion). If he regarded philosophical knowledge as *episteme* (demonstrative science), he would hardly recommend a

type of procedure that befits sifting opinions and testing them for their relative truth. If philosophical truths consisted of self-evident principles and rigorously demonstrated conclusions, one would not proceed in this way.

(d) In addition, Aristotle is an empirical philosopher in the proper sense of that term; namely, a philosopher who submits theories and conclusions—his own and those of others—to the empirical test, by appeal to the common experience of mankind.

(3) The Greek philosophers—here both Plato and Aristotle, though in quite different ways—managed to detect and expose a large number of typical fallacies, paradoxes, and puzzles that result from linguistic or logical inadequacies, imprecisions, or confusions in the discourse that is generated by philosophical problems.

c. What I am saying here is that Plato and Aristotle initiated philosophy, not only on the plane of questions about reality but also on the plane of questions about human thought and speech, especially when these are concerned with difficult questions about reality.

d. These three contributions can be recognized and given their due meed of praise without any regard to the substantive truth or error in the philosophical positions taken by Plato and Aristotle on particular problems. When we take all three into account, it is hard to see how philosophy could have had a more auspicious beginning. Nevertheless, the circumstances under which philosophy was born and went through its first state of development were not wholly auspicious. I have three misfortunes in mind.

4. The misfortunes of philosophy in antiquity were as follows:

a. First and most important of all, there was in antiquity no clear line between philosophy, on the one hand, and either science or religion, on the other.

(1) The ancients did not clearly and explicitly separate questions that cannot be answered without investigation from questions that can be answered without investigation.

(2) As a consequence of this, Aristotle treated, as if they were properly philosophical questions, questions that can be answered only by investigative science—questions about the nature and motions of the heavenly bodies, questions about the nature, number, and operation of the human senses, questions about the elementary

forms of matter, questions about the species of living things, their order, relation, and origin.

(3) Many of the treatises of Aristotle exhibit him as dealing with what we now know to be philosophical questions, on the one hand, and what we now recognize to be scientific questions, on the other; but he deals with them as if they were all philosophical questions.

(4) We know that he was an investigative scientist as well as a reflective philosopher; but he did not know it. He did not separate—and, in his day, probably could not have separated—these two modes of inquiry in which he engaged, as we, looking back at him, can retrospectively separate his efforts at scientific inquiry from his lines of philosophical thought.

(5) This, then, is one of the misfortunes of philosophy in antiquity: by virtue of the inchoate togetherness of science and philosophy, philosophy took upon itself a burden that it could not discharge—the burden of answering questions that did not properly belong in its domain.

(a) We can see the particular sciences—such as physics, astronomy, chemistry, physiology, zoology—in the womb of ancient philosophy. Philosophy is, historically, their mother; but they have not yet broken away from her and established themselves as branches of a separate and autonomous discipline, the discipline of investigative science.

(b) Until this happens—and it does not begin to happen until the seventeenth century—they constitute a burden and a distraction to philosophy; worse than that, the errors which philosophers make in unwittingly trying to deal with matters that properly belong to science insidiously affect their treatment of matters which are properly their own concern.

b. What I have just said about science and philosophy in antiquity can also be said about science and religion: they were also inchoately confused.

(1) The ancients did not realize that certain questions were of a sort that exceeded the powers of all human inquiry to answer questions that could not be answered either by investigation or by reflection on the common experience of mankind.

(2) Both Plato and Aristotle tried, as philosophers, to handle such questions—Plato in the *Timaeus*, in the *Phaedo*, and in the *Laws*,

Aristotle in the eighth book of the *Physics*, the twelfth book of the *Metaphysics*, and the tenth book of the *Ethics*.

c. Both Plato and Aristotle were bewitched by the conception of philosophy as *episteme*—as something much more certain and incorrigible than opinion because it is grounded in incontestable, self-evident axioms or first principles and proceeds therefrom to demonstrate its conclusions.

(1) They both drew a sharp line between knowledge and opinion (*nous* and *episteme*, on the one hand, and *doxa*, on the other), and they both placed mathematics and philosophy on the knowledge side of the line.

(2) This misfortune, at the very beginning of philosophy's history, plagues it throughout its history, not only in antiquity, but also in the Middle Ages and in modern times.

(3) The subsequent history of philosophical thought was grievously influenced by the exaltation and idealization of knowledge (*nous* and *episteme*) as over against the best that can be achieved in the realm of opinion (*doxa*).

(4) Later philosophers, whether they agreed or disagreed with the substance of Platonic or Aristotelian teaching, adopted the ideal of *nous* and *episteme* as one to be aimed at in philosophical work. Some of them went much further and did what Plato and Aristotle refrained from doing; they expounded their own philosophical thought in a form and with a structure that made it look as if it conformed to the ideal.

(5) If subsequent ages had paid more attention to the actual sifting of philosophical opinions that goes on in the dialogues of Plato, and had recognized that the *Posterior Analytics* does not describe the structure or movement of philosophical thought as it occurs in all the major treatises of Aristotle, philosophy might have been saved many centuries of misdirection in the fruitless effort to conform itself to an inappropriate model.

d. The third misfortune that befell philosophy in antiquity is closely connected with the second. It is the baleful influence of mathematics, mainly in the form of geometry.

(1) Geometry provided the ancients with what they took to be the model of a deductive system. When Plato and Aristotle want to

exemplify what they mean by *episteme*, they usually offer the demonstration of geometrical theorems.

(a) Again it must be said in defense of Plato and Aristotle that they never made the mistake of Spinoza and other moderns, who actually try to expound a philosophical theory *in ordine geometrico*.

(b) Yet we cannot overlook the frequency with which they point to geometry as an actually developed body of knowledge which approximates their ideal better than any other and which, therefore, serves as a model to be imitated.

(2) The bewitchment of philosophy by mathematics—not only by geometrical demonstration, but also by the analytical character of mathematical thought—is a much more serious illness of philosophy in modern times than it was in antiquity.

(3) Nevertheless, the first signs of that illness can be I found in antiquity, not only in connection with the illusion about *episteme*, but also in the extensive use that Plato makes of geometrical figures and of numbers as exemplary forms.

B. The condition of philosophy in the middle ages

1. The great advance made in the middle ages, though not until the 13th century and not until the work of Thomas Aquinas, was a clear drawing of the line that divided philosophy from dogmatic theology, and separated the realm of reason from the realm of faith.

a. On the one hand, Aquinas preserved the relative autonomy of philosophy *vis-a-vis* dogmatic theology.

b. On the other hand, he restricted philosophy to its proper domain by limiting it to questions that are answerable by experience and reason and delimiting it from matters beyond the competence of experience and reason to treat.

c. The achievement of Aquinas thus relieving philosophy of the burden—the undue tasks and the distractions—of involvement in religious matters, deserves to rank with the contributions made by Plato and Aristotle to the formation and constitution of the philosophical enterprise.

d. Before I turn to the negative side of the picture, I must mention one other procedural gain that is made in the later Middle Ages.

(1) The universities of the thirteenth century, especially the faculties of Paris and of Oxford, instituted public disputations of both philosophical and theological questions.

(2) In the *Disputed Questions* and the *Quodibetal Questions* of Aquinas, we have a one-sided record of debates in which he was himself involved, but that record nevertheless reveals a procedure in which philosophers confronted one another, joined issues, and entered into debate.

(3) Problems are taken up in piecemeal fashion; questions are attacked one by one; objections are raised and answered. We have here, then, in these mediaeval disputations, a good procedural model for the conduct of philosophy as a public enterprise.

2. On the negative side, philosophy suffered a number of disorders.

a. Some of the things which plagued philosophy in antiquity continued to plague it in the Middle Ages. Though not caused by philosophy's relation to theology, they were aggravated by it. I have two manifestations of this in mind.

(1) One is the persistence of the illusion about *episteme*. This was aggravated by philosophy's involvement with dogmatic theology. The latter, rightly or wrongly, made claims to certitude and finality which had the effect of intensifying philosophy's quest for a kind of perfection in knowledge that it could never attain.

(a) If dogmas and dogmatism are proper anywhere, it is in theological doctrines that claim to have their foundation in the revealed word of God.

(b) While philosophy, strictly speaking, could not claim to have any dogmas or dogmatic foundations, it tried to rival theology with a certitude and finality of its own by giving its principles and conclusions the high status of knowledge in the form of *nous* and *episteme*.

(2) The other is the persistence of philosophical efforts to solve, *without investigation*, problems that belong to investigative science. This, too, was aggravated by philosophy's involvement with

dogmatic theology, the latter imbuing philosophy with an undue confidence in its powers.

b. In addition to the two persistent disorders just mentioned, philosophy is plagued by a new trouble—one which had its origin in the Middle Ages, but which mainly worked its mischief at the beginning of modern thought, in the age of Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz.

(1) Though Aquinas tried to relieve philosophy of the questions that are answerable only by faith, he left to philosophy a number of theological questions, about God and the human soul, the answers to which he called “preambles to faith.”

(2) These questions were assigned to a branch of philosophy which came to be called natural theology” to distinguish it from “dogmatic theology.” Since Aristotle, in a book he probably would have called “First Philosophy,” but which his editors entitled “Metaphysics” (meaning the books which came after the books on physics), also treated such questions, particularly questions about an immaterial, immutable, and eternal being; and since Aristotle himself used the words “theology” and “first philosophy” interchangeably for the discipline that concerned itself with these questions, natural theology gradually became established as a part of metaphysics.

(3) This helps us to understand how it came about that, at the end of the Middle Ages, when such secular philosophers as Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza emancipated themselves from dogmatic theology, they still retained, in their role as metaphysicians, an absorbing predilection for theological problems as witness Descartes’ *Meditations*, Leibniz’s *Theodicy* and *Discourse on Metaphysics*, and Spinoza’s *Ethics*.

(4) This overexpanded natural theology not only set much of subsequent scholastic philosophy off on a wild-goose chase: it also helped get modern philosophy off to a bad start.

(a) To make matters worse, the illusion of *episteme* was now doubly aggravated—on the one hand, by rivalry with the dogmatic certitude claimed by theology; on the other hand, by emulation of the demonstrative rigor attributed to mathematics.

(b) Misled by it, Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza initiated modern thought with dogmatic systems of philosophy, constructed in a pretentiously rigorous manner, and dealing with scientific, theo-

logical, and genuinely philosophical matters as if they were all susceptible to the same kind of treatment.

(c) You must carefully examine Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy*, Spinoza's *Ethics*, and Leibniz's *Monadology* and *Discourse on Metaphysics* to see for yourself the style and manner of philosophizing which I call "system building."

(d) You will then, I hope, readily understand why I use that term in a wholly derogatory sense, especially if you bear in mind my central contention that philosophy, as a mode of inquiry, aims at knowledge in the form of testable *doxa*, not unquestionable *episteme*.

(e) You will realize that system building defeats or violates the procedures proper to philosophy, especially its being conducted as a public enterprise in which common questions are faced, issues are joined, and disputes can be adjudicated.

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