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Part 2 of 3

C. The condition of philosophy in modern times

1. The modern period, like the ancient and the mediaeval, has its positive as well as its negative features—its turns for the better as well as its misfortunes and disorders. In telling the story of philosophy in modern times, I am going to reverse the order and postpone a consideration of philosophy's gains until I have described what I regard as the four major misfortunes or disorders which it has suffered since the seventeenth century.

a. The first of these misfortunes occurred in the context of an otherwise sound critical reaction to the dogmatism and pretentiousness of the philosophical systems of the seventeenth century.

(1) The critical movement in philosophy, from Locke to Kant, looked askance at these systems and challenged their unwarranted claims to be able to demonstrate and to know with certitude. It questioned as well their competence to deal with matters (both theological and scientific) beyond the proper scope of philosophical inquiry.

(a) In both of the respects just indicated, this critical reaction was sound, and it might have been wholly on the side of gain if it had insisted, positively, on the substitution of *doxa* for *episteme* as the standard or grade of knowledge at which philosophy should aim.

(b) That by itself would have dealt a death blow to system-building and provided an effective antitoxin against any future recurrence of the disease.

(2) Unfortunately the critical reaction to the systems of the seventeenth century took another course, and resulted in a serious disorder.

(a) To explain this, it is necessary to recall that, in the ancient and mediaeval worlds, metaphysics was called *philosophia prima* or “first philosophy.” Let me now extend the meaning of “first philosophy” to include not only speculative questions about what is and happens in the world but also normative questions about what ought to be done and sought.

(b) A sound approach to the examination of knowledge should acknowledge the existence of some knowledge to be examined. *Knowing what can be known* is prior to *asking how we know* what we know. Using the word “epistemology” for the theory of knowledge and especially for inquiries concerning the “origin, certainty, and extent” of our knowledge, I have two things to say about epistemology as part of the philosophical enterprise.

(c) First, it should be reflexive; that is, it should examine the knowledge that we do have; it should be a knowing about our knowing.

(d) Second, being reflexive, epistemology should be posterior to metaphysics, the philosophy of nature, ethics, political theory. In

other words, our knowing what can be known should take precedence over our knowing about our knowing.

(e) Both of these procedural points were violated in the critical movement that began with Locke and ran to Kant. Epistemology became “first philosophy,” taking precedence over all other branches of philosophical inquiry; and with Kant, it became the basis for “prolegomena to any “future metaphysic.”

(f) Epistemology more and more tended to swallow up the whole philosophical enterprise. It is this retreat from the known world and our knowledge of it to the world of the knower and his efforts to know which prepared the way for the later total retreat of philosophy (in our own century) to the plane of questions about language and thought, relinquishing entirely any claim to have a respectable method for carrying on inquiries about the world of real existences.

b. I turn now to the second major disorder of philosophy in modern times—the emulating of science and of mathematics.

(1) The philosophers of the seventeenth century, misled by their addiction to *episteme*, looked upon mathematics as the most perfect achievement of knowledge, and tried to “perfect” philosophy by mathematicizing it.

(2) This was done in different ways by Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz, but the effect upon philosophy was the same—the frustration of trying to achieve a precision of terminology and a rigor of demonstration that are appropriate in mathematics, because it deals exclusively with abstract entities, but inappropriate in philosophy as an attempt to answer questions about that which is and happens in the world or about what ought to be done and sought.

(3) This mistaken emulation of mathematics and the consequent effort to mathematicize philosophy reappear with unusual force in the twentieth century: in the “logical atomism” of Bertrand Russell, and in all the attempts to treat the language of mathematics as a model language, to be imitated in philosophical discourse.

(4) The effort to give philosophical terminology the simplicity of mathematical symbolism and the univocity of mathematical terms, and the effort to give philosophical formulations the “analyticity” of mathematical statements, put philosophy into a strait-jacket from which it has but recently broken loose by a series of almost self-destructive convulsions.

(5) Beginning also in the seventeenth century, philosophers began to be awed by the achievements of science and became more and more openly envious of certain features of science—the kind of progress which science makes, the kind of usefulness which it has, the kind of agreements and decisions which it can reach, and the kind of assent it wins from an ever widening public because its theories and conclusions can be tested empirically.

(6) Not recognizing that all these things can be achieved by philosophy in its own characteristic way, but only if it tries to achieve them in a manner appropriate to its own character as a non-investigative discipline, philosophers during the last three hundred years suffered and still suffer today from an unwarranted sense of inferiority to science.

(7) This sense of inferiority has, in turn, two, further results. It has driven some philosophers to make all sorts of mistaken efforts to imitate science. It has led others, such as the positivists in our own century, to turn the whole domain of inquiry about reality over to science and to restrict philosophy to questions about language and thought, where it does not have to compete with science.

(8) Either result is unfortunate. Philosophy should neither ape science as a discipline (in view of their basic difference in method), nor should it be the handmaiden of science conceived as the primary discipline (in view of philosophy's rightful claim to its own questions and, in addition, its superiority to science in rendering the world intelligible).

c. The third major misfortune suffered by philosophy in modern times occurs by way of a reaction to a reaction. I am referring here to the counter-reactionary restoration of philosophical systems in post-Kantian thought—in Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Fichte on the Continent and in such British Hegelians as Bradley, Bosanquet, Caird, and McTaggart and such American Hegelians as Josiah Royce

(1) What we have here is the evil of system building carried to its furthest possible extreme—an extreme to which, it must in all fairness be said, Hegel's commonsense British followers did not go. The Hegelian system is much more dogmatic, much more rationalistic, and much more out of touch with common experience than the Cartesian, the Leibnizian, and the Spinozist systems of the seventeenth century.

(2) In addition, a fault intrinsic to the earlier systems becomes much more exacerbated in the Hegelian system. It offers those who come to it no alternatives except wholesale acceptance or rejection. It constitutes a world of its own, and has no commerce or conversation with anything outside itself.

(3) The plurification of systems in the nineteenth century, each a personal world view of great imaginative power and poetic scope, took philosophy further in the wrong direction than it had ever gone before—further away from the tendencies it had manifested in earlier epochs, tendencies to acquire the character of a cooperative venture and a public enterprise.

d. The final misfortune of modern philosophy arose, as preceding ones did, by way of reaction to an existing state of affairs. This fourth and last disorder consists in three mistaken directions taken by twentieth-century thought, having one central animus in common—namely, that they all spring from a deep revulsion to the Hegelian misfortune.

(1) There is, first of all, the existentialist reaction to Hegel and all forms of Hegelianism.

(2) The other two reactions are alike in that they both move away from Hegel in procedure as well as in substance.

(a) One of these reactions to Hegel is the retreat conducted by the positivists, Viennese, British, and American. When the members of the Vienna Circle referred to “metaphysics” and attacked it as an abomination which must be forever extirpated from the philosophical enterprise, they had Hegel, and only Hegel, in mind.

(b) The other reaction is not to Hegel himself as much as to British Hegelianism. It is the retreat conducted by the British analysts and linguistic philosophers and their American followers.

(c) The end result of both retreats is very much the same: philosophy is relegated to the plane of a discipline concerned with language and thought, not with reality.

2. So far I have had nothing good to say about the career of philosophy in modern times. However, just as, in treating the auspicious beginning which philosophy enjoyed in Greek antiquity, I also pointed out that its first epoch was not unattended by serious misfortunes, so now, in concluding an account of philosophy in

modern times I am going to point out two auspicious developments that relieve this long tale of disorders and misfortunes.

a. The first of these is, perhaps, the more important of the two. It is the successive separation of all the positive sciences, both natural and social, from the parent stem of philosophy.

(1) It is only in modern times that the natural sciences have gradually separated themselves from what in the seventeenth century was still called “natural philosophy.” Similarly, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the behavioral sciences gradually separated themselves from what was once called “moral philosophy.”

(2) With these successive secessions, the scientific enterprise as a whole filially became clearly and plainly established as an autonomous branch of human knowledge and as a distinct mode of inquiry.

(3) At last, after twenty-five centuries, it becomes possible to draw a sharp line between the domains of science and philosophy; and philosophy is freed of the burden which, for lack of clarity carried so long—the burden of treating, as philosophical, questions that belong to science and are outside philosophy’s competence to treat.

b. The second gain that has been made in modern times, almost as important as the first, is in one way only the relation of an earlier condition beneficial to philosophy.

(1) What I have in mind here is the contribution to the development of philosophy that has been made in our own century by the British analysts and linguistic philosophers.

(2) It involves the tackling of philosophical problems, question by question; it involves cooperation among men working on the same problems; it involves the policing of their work by acknowledged standards or tests; it involves the adjudication of disputes and the settling of differences.

(3) Though this can be viewed as a return to the conception of philosophy as a cooperative enterprise, first enunciated by Aristotle, and also as a return to the spirit of the public disputations in the Middle Ages, it marks a great advance in modern times.

(4) It is really the only major effort in modern times to conduct philosophy as a public enterprise. If the spirit of this movement can

be made to prevail at last against the central modern fault of system building, it may put philosophy back on the right track and keep it there.

D. Let me sum all of this up by first listing the negative features of philosophy's past which should be eliminated from its future, and then calling attention to the positive features of philosophy's past which should be preserved, consolidated, and enhanced.

The seven negative features are as follows:

1. The illusion of *episteme*
2. Dogmatic systems and personal system building
3. Carrying a burden of problems beyond its competence, resulting from lack of sharp distinction of the domain of philosophy from the domain of science, on the one hand, and from the domain of religion and dogmatic theology, on the other
4. The emulation of science and mathematics in respects quite inappropriate to the conduct of the philosophical enterprise
5. Its assumption of quasi-religious status by offering itself as a way of life
6. The relinquishment of first-order inquiries to science; and the retreat to second-order questions exclusively
7. Suicidal epistemologizing with all its consequences

The five positive features are as follows:

1. Plato's and Aristotle's exploration of first-order questions, both speculative and practical

(This has been enhanced by the addition of questions posed and explored by philosophers in subsequent centuries.)

2. Aristotle's first approximation to philosophy's distinctive method, which involves common experience as a source and as a test of philosophical theories and conclusions

(This, too, can be enhanced by our ability now to make a clearer distinction between special and common experience, in consequence of Point 3 below.)

3. The separation, in modern times, of the particular positive sciences from the parent stem of philosophy

(As a result, science as an investigative mode of inquiry is at last quite distinct from philosophy as a non-investigative mode of inquiry, though both deal with first-order questions and deal with them empirically.)

4. The equally sharp separation, first seen as a possibility in the thirteenth century, of the domain of philosophy from the domain of religion or dogmatic theology

(With the realization of that possibility, philosophy should be relieved of the burden of theological questions beyond its competence, just as the clear distinction between science and philosophy relieves it of the burden of scientific questions beyond its competence.)

5. The conduct of philosophy as a public enterprise—as a collective, not an individual, pursuit.

The germ of this comes to us from two great moments in philosophy's distant past:

first, from Aristotle's declaration of concern with the opinions of his predecessors and his sense that the pursuit of philosophical truth requires us to consider the opinions of all contributors to the discussion of philosophy's problems; and, second, from the mediæval institution of the public debate of philosophical issues, together with the philosophical interchanges that occurred in the seventeenth century.

III. Autobiographical Confession: How My Own Mind Has Been Formed by the Study of Western Thought—by the Reading of the Great Books in Philosophy in the St. John's Program.

A. My commitment to Aristotle and what it means to me

1. My serious study of philosophy began when, at Columbia University in the early twenties, I took a course in the history of philosophy taught by Professor F. J. E. Woodbridge. Just before Christmas in 1921, I received as a Christmas gift, a copy of the Oxford translation of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, with an inscription

from Professor Woodbridge that read as follows: “To Mortimer Adler who has already begun to make good use of this book.”

2. I owe to Professor Woodbridge, for whom, as for Thomas Aquinas, Aristotle was “the Philosopher,” my early sense of the number and variety of the truths that might be found by a careful study of Aristotle’s works, as well as a recognition of the soundness of Aristotle’s approach to philosophical problems and his method of philosophizing.

3. But I owe to Thomas Aquinas, whose *Summa Theologica* I discovered a few years later, the instructive example of a powerful use of that method, together with the direction and guidance one needs not only in the study of Aristotelian philosophy, but also in the application of it to problems not

4. With one or two exceptions, all the fundamental philosophical truths that I have learned in more than fifty years, to which I am now firmly committed, I have learned from Aristotle, from Aquinas as a student of Aristotle, from Jacques Maritain as a student of them both.

a. I have searched my mind thoroughly and I cannot find in it a single truth that I have learned from works in modern philosophy written since the beginning of the 17th century.

b. If anyone is outraged by this judgment about almost four hundred years of philosophical thought, let him recover from it by considering the comparable judgment that almost all modern and contemporary philosophers have made about the two thousand years of philosophical thought that preceded the 17th century.

c. In view of the fact that philosophy, unlike science, does not advance with each succeeding generation of men at work, it should not be deemed impossible, or even unlikely, that the first two thousand years of philosophical thought discovered a body of truths to which little if anything has been added and from which much has been lost in the last four hundred years.

5. The pre-modern career of philosophy contains errors as well as truths. As I have already intimated, the truths, for the most part, have been contributed by Aristotle and by Aristotelians. Even the tradition of Aristotelian thought is not without faults—deficiencies and errors. In the course of my own work as a student of Aristotle and Aquinas, I have, from time to time, uncovered such faults and tried to correct them.

In every case the correction of an error or the repair of a deficiency in the philosophy of Aristotle and Aquinas rests on the underlying and controlling principles of Aristotelian and Thomistic thought. In fact, the discovery of such errors or deficiencies almost always springs from close attention and leads to a deeper understanding of those principles.

6. Here lies what for me is the remarkable difference between the faults I have found in modern philosophy and the faults I have found in the tradition of Aristotelian and Thomistic thought.

a. The errors and deficiencies in this or that modern philosopher's thought arise either from his misunderstanding or, worse, his total ignorance of insights and distinctions indispensable to getting at the truth—insights and distinctions that were so fruitful in the work of Aristotle and Aquinas, but which modern philosophers have either ignored or, misunderstanding them, have dismissed.

b. In addition, the errors or deficiencies in the thought of this or that modern philosopher cannot be corrected by appealing to his own most fundamental principles, as in the case with Aristotle and Aquinas. On the contrary, it is usually his principles—his points of departure—that embody the little errors in the beginning which, Aristotle and Aquinas so well knew, have such serious consequences in the end.

7. To say, as I have said, that I have not learned a single fundamental truth from the writings of modern philosophers is not to say that I have learned nothing at all from them. With the exception of Hegel and other post-Kantian German philosophers, I have read their works with both pleasure and profit.

a. The pleasure has come from the perception of errors the serious consequences of which tend to reinforce my hold on the truths I have learned from Aristotle and Aquinas.

b. The profit has come from the perception of new genuine problems, not the pseudo-problems, perplexities, and puzzlements invented by therapeutic positivism and by linguistic or analytical philosophy in our own century.

c. The profit to be derived from the perception of these problems (of which Aristotle and Aquinas were aware or were only dimly aware) is the stimulus it gives us to try to extend their thought response to them. I have always found that I could solve such prob-

lems within the general framework and in the light of the basic principles of their thought. They may not have faced the questions that we are obliged to answer, but they nevertheless do provide us with the clues or leads needed for discovering the answers.

B. How my commitment to Aristotle may look to others and why I think their view of it is wrong

1. In the eyes of my contemporaries, the label “Aristotelian” has dyslogistic connotations: it has had such connotations since the beginning of modern times.

a. To call a man an Aristotelian carries with it highly derogatory implications. It suggests that his is a closed mind, in such slavish subjection to the thought of one philosopher as to be impervious to the insights or arguments of others.

b. However, it is certainly possible to be an Aristotelian—or the devoted disciple of some other philosopher—without also being a blind and slavish adherent of his views, declaring with misplaced piety that he is right in everything he says, never in error, or that he has cornered the market on truth and is in no respect deficient or defective.

2. Such a declaration would be so preposterous that only a fool would affirm it. Foolish Aristotelians there must have been among the decadent scholastics who taught philosophy in the universities of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They probably account for the vehemence of the reaction against Aristotle, as well as the flagrant misapprehension or ignorance of his thought, that is to be found in Thomas Hobbes and Francis Bacon, in Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz.

a. The folly is not the peculiar affliction of Aristotelians. Cases of it can certainly be found, in the last century, among those who gladly called themselves Kantians or Hegelians; and in our own day, among those who take pride in being disciples of John Dewey or Ludwig Wittgenstein.

b. But if it is possible to be a follower of one of the modern thinkers without going to an extreme that is foolish, it is no less possible to be an Aristotelian who rejects his errors and deficiencies while embracing the truths he is able to teach.

3. Even granting that it is possible to be an Aristotelian without being doctrinaire about it, it remains the case that being an Aristo-

telian is somehow less respectable in recent centuries and in our time than being a Kantian or a Hegelian, an existentialist, a utilitarian, a pragmatist, or some other “ist” or “ian.”

a. I have, for example, dared to say that Aristotle’s *Ethics* is a unique book in the tradition of moral philosophy—that it is the only sound, pragmatic, and completely undogmatic work in ethics, offering what little normative wisdom there is for all men to be guided by in their pursuit of happiness.

b. If similar statements were made by a disciple of Kant or John Stuart Mill in a book that expounded and defended the Kantian or utilitarian position in moral philosophy, they would be received without raised eyebrows or shaking heads.

c. Why is this so? My only answer is that it must be believed that, because Aristotle and Aquinas did their thinking so long ago, they cannot reasonably be supposed to have been right in matters about which those who came later were wrong. Much must have happened in the realm of philosophical thought during the last three or four hundred years that requires an open-minded person to abandon their teachings for something more recent and, therefore, supposedly better.

d. My response to that view is negative. I have found faults in the writings of Aristotle and Aquinas, but it has not been my reading of modern philosophical works that has called my attention to these faults, or helped me to correct them. On the contrary, it has been my understanding of the underlying principles and the formative insights that govern the thought of Aristotle and Aquinas that has provided the basis for amending or amplifying their views where they are fallacious or defective.

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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