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Part 3 of 3

IV. Let me now see if I can explain why modern philosophy failed to improve on or add to the wisdom of the past to any considerable extent

A. Earlier in this lecture, I have indicated the respects in which modern thought should have been able to improve upon the wisdom of the past.

1. Yet with regard to purely philosophical questions in speculative philosophy—in metaphysics, in the theory of knowledge, in the

philosophy of mind—few if any advances have been made in modern times.

2. On the contrary, much has been lost as the result of errors that might have been avoided if ancient truths had been preserved in the modern period instead of being ignored. Why this happened needs to be explained.

B. Modern philosophy, as I see it, got off to a very bad start—with Hobbes and Locke in England, and with Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz on the Continent. Each of these thinkers acted as if he had no predecessors worth consulting, as if he were starting with a clean slate, to construct for the first time the whole of philosophical knowledge.

1. We cannot find in their writings the slightest evidence of their sharing Aristotle's insight that no man by himself is able to attain the truth adequately, though collectively men do not fail to amass a considerable amount; nor do they ever manifest the slightest trace of a willingness to call into council the views of their predecessors in order to profit from whatever is sound in their thought and to avoid their errors.

2. On the contrary, without anything like a careful, critical examination of the views of their predecessors, these modern thinkers issue blanket repudiations of the past as a repository of errors. The discovery of philosophical truth begins with themselves.

3. Proceeding, therefore, in ignorance or misunderstanding of truths that could have been found in the funded tradition of almost 2,000 years of Western thought, these modern philosophers made crucial mistakes, both in their points of departure and in their initial postulates—little errors in the beginning which, as Aristotle pointed out, usually lead to disastrous consequences in the end.

4. The commission of these consequential errors can be explained in part by antagonism toward the past, and even contempt for it.

a. The explanation of the antagonism lies in the character of the teachers under whom these modern philosophers studied in their youth. Instead of passing on the philosophical tradition as a living thing by recourse to the writings of the great philosophers of the past; instead of reading and commenting on the works of Aristotle, for example, as the great teachers of the thirteenth century did, the decadent scholastics who occupied teaching posts in the universities of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries fossilized the tradi-

tion by presenting it in a deadly, dogmatic fashion, using a jargon that concealed, rather than conveyed, the insights it contained.

b. Their lectures must have been as wooden and uninspiring as most of their textbooks and manuals are their examinations must have called for a verbal parroting of the letter of ancient doctrines rather than for an understanding of their spirit.

c. It is no wonder that early modern thinkers, thus mistaught, recoiled. Their repugnance, though certainly explicable, may not be wholly pardonable, for they could have repaired the damaged by turning to the texts of Aristotle or Aquinas in their mature years and by reading them perceptively and critically.

d. That they did not do this can be ascertained from an examination of their major works and from their intellectual biographies. When they reject certain points of doctrine inherited from the past, it is perfectly clear that they do not properly understand them; in addition, they make mistakes that arise from ignorance of distinctions and insights highly relevant to problems they attempt to solve.

5. With very few exceptions, such misunderstanding and ignorance of philosophical achievements prior to the sixteenth century have been the besetting sin of modern thought.

a. Its effects are not confined to philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They are evident in the work of nineteenth-century philosophers and in the writings of our own day. We can find them, for example, in the works of Ludwig Wittgenstein who, for all his native brilliance and philosophical fervor, stumbles in the dark in dealing with problems on which his pre-modern predecessors, unknown to him, have thrown great light.

b. In the centuries that followed the opening period of modern thought, thinkers who adopted some of the premises of Descartes or Locke while reacting against other elements in their thought compounded the initial errors which they made.

(1) Judging the consequences to which the adopted premises led to be unacceptable, these subsequent thinkers should have recognized that these consequences followed from errors that could have been corrected.

(2) This they did not do. Instead, in order to avoid consequences they regarded as repugnant, they struck out in other directions and fell into more grievous errors.

C. Modern philosophy has never recovered from its false start. Like men floundering in quicksand who compound their difficulties by struggling to extricate themselves, 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 paths by Descartes, Locke, and Hume.

D. To make a fresh start, it is only necessary to open the great philosophical books of the past (especially those written by Aristotle and in his tradition) and to read them with the effort of understanding that they deserve. The recovery of basic truths, long hidden from view, would eradicate errors that have had such disastrous consequences in modern times.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Let me conclude this lecture by telling you how the philosophy of Aristotle protects the mind from error by providing it with the bodyguards of truth.

A. “In wartime,” Winston Churchill said, “truth is so precious that it should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies” to safeguard it against detection by the enemy.

1. In modern times, philosophical thought also needs a bodyguard to protect it from succumbing to the errors that abound on all sides. Or perhaps I should say that, in the life of the mind, the pursuit of truth is so precarious that it needs safeguards to keep it from falling into error.

2. These safeguards are themselves truths—a relatively small number of insights and distinctions that should underlie all our thinking to protect us from the little errors in the beginning that have such serious consequences in the end.

B. By way of example, let me call your attention to certain insights and distinctions that, in my own philosophizing, have served as the bodyguards of truth.

1. I owe all of them to Aristotle and Aquinas or to the philosophical tradition associated with their names.

2. To mention all the errors from which these insights and distinctions save us would extend this lecture far into the night. I shall

content myself with brief indications of typical modern errors against which they seal the mind.

C. Errors in psychology

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

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

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

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

Professor Veatch has called the “transcendental turn, “ to which Kant deemed it necessary to resort in order to get around Hume.

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

D. Errors in metaphysics

1. Before Locke, the modern period has only three thinkers—Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz—who address themselves to questions that belong to metaphysics as the science of being, the modes of being, and the properties of being. The diverse mistakes they make with regard to substances and causes, matter and form, body and mind, do not spring from a single little error like that about ideas. I will, therefore, not attempt to analyze in detail what I think is the misdirection of their thought.

2. After Locke, and especially after Hume and Kant, there are remarkably few modern thinkers who deal with the problems of metaphysics as those are set forth in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* and Aquinas’ *De Ente et Essentia*.

a. The subject—matter that is examined and illuminated in those two treatises has been *terra incognita* for almost three hundred years.

b. All the while, the word “metaphysics” has been used by positivists as a term of reproach to name post-Kantian speculations which cannot be defended against their criticisms, but which are also not metaphysical in the proper sense of that term.

E. Errors in moral and political philosophy

1. In political philosophy, two controlling insights serve as guardians of truth. One is the insight that enables us to understand that the state is both natural and conventional (natural in its final cause, conventional in its efficient cause).

a. With this understood, we are saved from the necessity of imagining the origin of the state and government by recourse to the myth about men living in a state of nature.

b. That modern myth is still in vogue, as two widely discussed recent books in political philosophy make painfully evident.

2. The other controlling insight in political philosophy lies in an understanding of two distinct senses of the common good—on the one hand, the public good that is common because it is participated in by the members of an organized community; on the other hand, the private good that is common because it is the same in all men.

a. The first of these common goods, the *bonum commune comunitatis*, is the end aimed at directly by just governments.

b. The second, the *bonum commune humans*, is the temporal happiness or good human life which is man's ultimate end on earth, and toward the achievement of which the public good and private virtue are indispensable means.

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

4. What I have just said would not be understood by a single modern thinker who has anything to say about happiness in his moral philosophy. All of them make two mistakes that an understanding of Aristotle's *Ethics* would have helped them to avoid.

a. One is their failure to distinguish between happiness as a terminal end (an end that can be reached and enjoyed at a given moment in time—or in eternity), and happiness as a normative end (an end that, being the temporal whole of an entire life well lived, can never be experienced or enjoyed at any moment in the process).

b. Inseparable from that mistake is their misconception of happiness in purely psychological terms as the state of contentment that results from satisfying whatever desires an individual happens to have.

c. Not a single modern philosopher, from Locke, Kant, and J. S. Mill on, conceives happiness in purely ethical terms as the quality of a whole life that results from satisfying, successively and cumulatively, not any desires, but only right desires.

5. The reason for this is an even deeper underlying failure—failure to take note of the Aristotelian and Thomistic distinction between natural and elicited desires: desires common to all men because they are rooted in the specific nature and capacities of man, and desires that differ from individual to individual because they are products of individual circumstances, individual differences, and individual experiences.

a. Let me use the terms “natural needs” and “individual wants” to name these two distinct types of human desire. The things we call good because we do in fact want them are only apparent goods; the things we ought to desire because they are in fact good are, in contradistinction, real goods. This is another distinction to be found in Aristotle which moral philosophy in modern times has ignored.

b. Only when this distinction is understood, can we recognize the self-evident truth of the moral imperative that we ought to desire everything that is really good for us and nothing but that which is really good.

(1) Without it, little sense can be made in Augustine’s magnificent maxim: Happy is the man who has everything he desires, provided he desire nothing amiss.

(2) Without it, and without the insight that natural rights derive from natural needs or right desires, the doctrine of natural rights ceases to give substance to the theory of general, as distinct from special, justice, which is still another distinction currently ignored.

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

6. I have left for the last one point that would have saved moral philosophy in modern times, especially in the last hundred years, from its unsolved perplexities with regard to the grounds upon which normative judgments can claim to be true.

a. If the only type of truth that is recognized is the truth that lies in the agreement between a judgment and the reality it describes, then normative judgments—assertions of what ought to be, not assertions of what is cannot be either true or false.


b. The only way to avoid the conclusion that ethics must be non-cognitive is to recognize that the truth in normative judgments is quite distinct from the truth in descriptive judgments.

c. Aristotle and Aquinas are the only philosophers in the whole tradition of Western thought who accurately perceived the difference between what they called speculative and practical truth, which I have just called descriptive and normative truth.

d. The distinction is made in a single sentence in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Practical truth, Aristotle says there, is the truth of a judgment that conforms to right desire, whereas speculative truth is the truth of a judgment that agrees with the way things really are.

(1) The normative judgment that something ought to be desired because it is really good is a judgment that is true because it conforms to a right desire.

(2) In contrast, a normative judgment is false if it asserts that something which a man wants but does not need—an apparent, not a real good—ought to be desired.

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

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