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A DIALECTIC OF MORALS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: THE DIALECTICAL TASK

IN ST. THOMAS AND THE GENTILES I tried to define the obligations of perennial philosophy in the twentieth century. Philosophy may be perennial, but its work changes according to the cultural conditions in which the philosopher lives and thinks. In its Greek beginnings, philosophy arose out of the dialectical efforts of Plato and Aristotle to clarify and order the welter of opinion. They struggled not only with the sophists to divide the line between knowledge and opinion; but they also moved in the realm of opinion to distinguish the true from the false; and, in their patient consideration of pre-Socratic thought, they both tried, though differently, to convert right opinion into knowledge by making it evident to reason.

Although the result of their work was the establishment of philosophy as a body of knowledge, founded on principles and developed by demonstrations, we must not forget that, in their day, the mode of their work was primarily dialectical. In saying this I do not overlook the demonstrative or scientific achievements of Plato and Aristotle; but those must be regarded as secondary, for the first work of pioneers is to stake out the land, to clear away the brush, to prepare the soil, and to dig for firm foundations. Only thereafter can a city be planned, buildings raised, and interiors decorated.

The Platonic dialogues certainly reveal an intellectual pioneer at work; but no less do the so-called "scientific" works of Aristotle, for they are primarily records of exploration and discovery. Rather than orderly expositions of accomplished knowledge, they are, not only in their opening chapters but throughout, dialectical engagements with adversaries, wrestlings with the half-truths of error and opinion in order to set the whole truth forth.

Under the altered cultural circumstances of the Middle Ages, philosophy lived a different sort of life. With few exceptions, the mediaeval philosophers dwelt in the domain Plato and Aristotle had won from the wilderness. The fields having been cleared and the foundations completed, the philosopher now had a different sort of work to do. Accepting the ground-plan, he proceeded to erect the mansions of philosophy, each well ordered to the others, and in each orderly disposition of many rooms. The architectural achievement the mediaeval philosophers extended even to exterior facades and the detail of furnishings within. And in all this work, the primary mode of procedure was demonstrative rather than dialectical.

In contrast to the writings of Plato and Aristotle, the philosophical literature of the Middle Ages is expository rather than exploratory. It proceeds by steps of analysis and synthesis. The so-called "deductive" character of mediaeval thought must not be taken to mean that medieval philosophers regarded philosophy as primarily or exclusively deductive, but rather as signifying that they were no longer in the pioneering stage. The inductive work, which is necessarily first, had already been well done by the Greeks.

Again I must point out that, emphasizing the demonstrative mode of mediaeval thought, I am not overlooking its dialectical phases. But the dialectical efforts of the Middle Ages were mainly in new territory, in theology rather than philosophy, and, of course, in the borderlands between philosophy and theology. And even where, within the sphere of purely philosophical questions, there is the

obviously dialectical procedure of objection and reply, the dialectic is defensive rather than exploratory. It is not undertaken as a way of discovering the truth, but rather as a way to purify the truth of admixed errors, or to assimilate to knowledge the truth that is contained in errors. In every aspect and at every stage of this undertaking, the philosopher regards himself as having a wealth of well-established knowledge—an inheritance he must husband against loss or decay, a fortune he must defend against the foes of truth, an endowment not only to live on and by, but to increase by using it well.

Now the modern followers of Aristotle and St. Thomas—or, for that matter, the followers of Plato and St. Bonaventure—should not neglect the fact that the cultural situation in which they find themselves is neither Greek nor mediaeval. The most dismal failure of all modern "scholasticism" is its failure to be modern. This is true not only of the second-hand text-books which try to be even more demonstrative and less dialectical than the great mediaeval works, whose intellectual achievement they reflect dimly, whose living rigor becomes in the copy a *rigor mortis*. With some exceptions, it is true even of the work of the best Thomists, from John of St. Thomas to the present day.[1]

The reason for this is the failure to see precisely the way in which modern culture imposes upon the philosopher a situation analogous to, not the same as, the one in which Plato and Aristotle did their work. It is not merely that the cultural aggrandizement of the investigative or phenomenological sciences has gradually threatened the very existence of philosophy and has progressively worked to dispossess it of its ancient home; worse, and in consequence, the prevalence of positivism today requires the philosopher to face an audience radically skeptical of anything he may say, doubtful even that he can say anything worth listening to at all.

I am assuming, of course, that a philosopher who is alive today should try to talk to his contemporaries, and by this I mean an audience much wider than the inner circle of his like-minded fellows in the philosophical enterprise. This is not the living philosopher's only obligation, but if he is concerned with the life of philosophy in modern culture, it is his primary one. To discharge it, he must proceed dialectically, not demonstratively, and his dialectical efforts must resemble the Greek rather than the mediaeval mode of argument. Though he might regret the fact that history's progressive spiral seems to throw him back to an earlier stage, he must return to the pioneer work of the Greeks. He must once again try to be primitively inductive about the basic philosophical truths.[1a]

I describe the motion of history as the path of a spiral, because the same ground is never retraced. Unlike the simpler cyclical motion which returns to the same place, progress along a spiral reaches an analogous place—both the same and different. This is illustrated by the fact that the contemporary follower of Aristotle and St. Thomas cannot do *exclusively* either the sort of work which Aristotle did or the sort done by St. Thomas. He must do both sorts, and in that very fact he at once resembles and differs from each of them.

Like St. Thomas, the contemporary Aristotelian must continue the constructive work that the Middle Ages began so well and did so much of—the systematic and demonstrative elaboration of philosophical knowledge.[2] Like Aristotle, the contemporary Thomist, because he is living in the modern world, must undertake the primary dialectical task of making evident the most rudimentary philosophical truths.[3] And because we are obligated today to do both sorts of work, we can do neither well unless as we do the one, we are always mindful of the other.

When perennial philosophy shakes off the dead skin of scholasticism, and really comes to live in a modern metamorphosis, the event will be signified by a renewal of the dialectical enterprise with which philosophy originated in the Greek period, as well as by the renovation of the edifice which the Middle Ages raised upon Greek foundations. And each—the renewal and the renovation—will penetrate the other.

In this essay I am going to try to exemplify—even though inadequately and remotely—what I mean by the modern analogue of Greek philosophical work. I am going to try to proceed dialectically against those who say there is no moral knowledge; who say that good and bad, right and wrong, are entirely matters of opinion; who say, as a consequence, that "might makes right" in the sphere of politics. My aim is not merely negative, though in an effort to establish first principles, my arguments will usually take the form of the *reductio ad impossibile*. The destructive force of such arguments is, however, for the sake of a positive result—the inductive perception of the most elementary truths.

There are many other topics which offer similar occasions for dialectical work and, in every case, there is a parallelism between the contemporary situation and that of fifth century Greece. Thus, where the ancient sophists denied knowledge and said that everything was a matter of opinion, the modern positivists deny that there is any knowledge beyond or outside of the so-called positive

sciences, or, in other words, they say that philosophy is opinion. As, in the ancient world, there were those who said that the truth was merely what appeared to be the case, and hence relative to each individual, so today there are similar relativists about truth. As then there were those who denied any way of knowing except by the senses, so now the intellect is denied as a distinct faculty of knowing. As among the pre-Socratic physicists there were those who regarded the sensible world as exclusively an affair of flux and becoming, in which there were no enduring entities, such as substances, so those who regard themselves as philosophical interpreters of modern physics also deny substances, and view the sensible world as nothing but a process of events.

In each of these cases, the dialectical task confronting us is analogous to the task that Plato and Aristotle faced: to establish, *inductively*, the distinction between knowledge and opinion and to show that philosophy is knowledge; to establish that truth is objective and the same for all people because it is an agreement of the mind with reality; to establish the distinction between sensitive and intellectual knowing, and to show that people know things that they cannot know by their senses alone; to establish the existence of substances as the subjects of change.

I have chosen the topic of moral knowledge—the objectivity and universality of moral standards—because it is so relevant to this critical moment in our culture. It will not be necessary to engage in distinct dialectical enterprises for the separate fields of ethics and politics. If skepticism about moral truths can be overcome at all, if any judgments about good and bad can be shown to have the status of knowledge, then a foothold is won for political as well as for ethical standards. How much of the traditional content of ethics and politics can be drawn from the few principles we are able to establish dialectically is something which remains to be seen.

Let me describe the state of mind which I call moral skepticism. It is not a total skepticism. There is no question about the validity of the natural and social sciences. These sciences describe phenomena; their generalizations can always be verified by reference to particular sense experiences; and even though the truths they achieve are not "final" or "absolute"—but always relative to the data now at hand—these truths are, nevertheless, objective in the sense that they are matters upon which all competent judges can be expected to agree in the light of the evidence.

In contrast to the affirmation of the natural and social sciences is the denial of the moral sciences—the branches of practical philosophy traditionally known as ethics and politics. This denial is

made on any one of three counts: (1) It may be involved in the general denial of philosophical knowledge, for this would eliminate the possibility of practical philosophy as a body of knowledge.[4] (2) Even though some branches of philosophy are admitted as a kind of knowledge, such as logic and mathematics.[5] There is no philosophical knowledge which reports the nature of things; and to the extent that ethics and politics depend upon theoretic philosophy, they are involved in this denial; (3) Whether or not theoretic philosophy has the status of knowledge, there cannot be any practical philosophy, for that would be "normative" or "evaluative" and such judgments can never be more than opinion.

The position of moral skeptics can, therefore, be summarized as follows. He says that about moral matters (good and bad, right and wrong, in the action of individuals or groups) there is only opinion, not knowledge. They say that moral judgments are entirely subjective, i. e., having truth or meaning only for the individual who makes them. They say that moral judgments are relative to the customs of a given community, at a given time and place, in which case, although the judgments made by an individual may be measured in terms of their conformity to the *mores* of the group, the *mores* themselves have no truth or meaning except for the group which has instituted them. They say that all norms or standards are entirely conventional, whether instituted by the will of the community or by the will of individuals; and this amounts to saying that moral judgments are ultimately willful prejudices, expressions of emotional bias, of temperamental predilection. That these several statements all come to the same thing can be seen in the fact that in every case the same thing is being denied, namely, the possibility of making moral judgments which are true for all people everywhere, unaffected not only by their individual differences but also by the diversity of the cultures under which they live.[6]

The issue is quite clear. The dialectical task is set. It will not do for the philosopher simply to reiterate their claims concerning the universality of moral truths, the self-evidence or demonstrability of the principles and conclusions of ethics and politics. Nor is it sufficient for them to be passive in their defense of them, however willing they may be to answer objections; for the moral skeptic, especially if he is a positivist, is not entirely wrong in charging that every answer begs the ultimate question—the question whether anything the philosopher says is more than opinion. In this situation, philosophers must be aggressive. They must engage the moral skeptic on his own grounds. They must open their adversary's mind to a perception of the truth—if not to the whole truth, at least to certain aspects of the truth which will function as seed to be cultivated. This is what I mean by an inductive use of dialectic.

I have elsewhere discussed the prevalence and causes of moral skepticism among the educated classes in America today.[7] It is the position of most of the teachers in our secular colleges and universities, and naturally enough it becomes the position of their students. I have already mentioned one of the causes, namely, positivism; but there are two others which, although consequences or aspects of positivism, should be separately noted. One is the kind of psychology that is taught: the only *knowledge* we are supposed to have concerning human nature comes to us from the laboratory or the clinic.[8] The other is the emphasis, in the teaching of all the social sciences, upon the diversity of *mores:* each culture consists of its own peculiar system of values, and there is no way of evaluating cultures themselves, no way of judging them, without begging the whole question, for such judgments would have to be made in terms of the "postulates" or assumptions underlying a given culture.[9]

Though the causes may be superficially different, insofar as they reflect peculiarly modern conditions, the ultimate sources of our moral skepticism are essentially the same as those responsible for the teaching of the Greek sophists.[10] The parallelism is extraordinary. In both cases, the issue is a matter of general concern because it deeply affects the education of youth; in both cases, the philosopher is opposed to the dominant elements in the teaching profession.

The dialectic of morals which I shall now proceed to outline is not an imaginary intellectual process. It is rather a distillation of actual arguments which President Hutchins [the late Robert M. Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago 1929-1951] and I have had with students in courses devoted to the reading of great works in ethics and politics. The situation we face year after year is the same: the students are, for the most part, moral skeptics. They challenge us to try to change their minds. In meeting that challenge we have found certain modes of argument most effective. The only invention involved in the development of this dialectic is the precise ordering of the steps. It is necessary to find those points of departure which make contact with the minds we are trying to move; and it is necessary to sustain the motion, once started, by linking the steps in a tight sequence, so that no leaps are required. Most of the steps are provided by the tradition, especially by Plato and Aristotle, but we have found it necessary to produce an ancient play of the mind in modern dress.

The whole dialectic cannot be accomplished in a single sequence. Several motions are involved, some from opposite directions, but

all converging on the point to be established. What I am going to set down in each case must be regarded as the bare plot for a dialogue between teacher and student. To write such dialogues out in full—to report in detail the actual sessions in which these arguments took place—would require more skill than I possess, and more space than is available. Furthermore, what is essentially the same intellectual process can take place in countless different ways, according to the contingent circumstances of actual discussion. These dialectical plots can never be enacted in the same way, but they are, nevertheless, common to a wide variety of conversations about such themes.

NOTES TO THE INTRODUCTION

1. If we consider carefully the character of these exceptions—their philosophical mood and temper—they illustrate, by contrast to the rest of "scholasticism," what it means for philosophers to remember the thirteenth without forgetting the twentieth century. Confining myself to the field of moral philosophy, I should cite as striking exceptions—striking in themselves and also striking because it is only in the very recent past that such work has occurred—the writings of Jacques Maritain (such as *True Humanism and Scholasticism and Politics*) and of Yves Simon (especially noteworthy in this connection is his *Nature and Functions of Authority*); and I must also mention the work of Father Walter Farrell. Return

1a. In *St. Thomas and the Gentiles*, I wrote: "Far from making every effort to join issue with those who differ from us, we have, in my judgment, not even begun to make an effort properly directed and properly proportionate to the task at hand. We have been loath to absent ourselves from the felicity of moving further into the interior of philosophical thought, when there is pressing work to be done on the border, the arduous and lowly work of the pioneer. The borderland I speak of is marked by the issue between those who hold, as we do, that philosophy is a field of knowledge in which there can be perennial truth and those who deny it" (p. 20). In this earlier work I tried to find a parallel for our task in the sort of dialectical work St. Thomas did against the gentiles in the sphere of faith. I now think a better parallel is to be found in the dialectic of Plato and Aristotle against the sophists, because the ancient effort was, and the modern effort must be, entirely within the sphere of reason.

In saying that the modern effort must be entirely within the sphere of reason, I am thinking of what I regard as the primary task of philosophy in the contemporary world—to win respect for itself in

a culture that is predominantly positivist. I hope it will be understood that this is not incompatible with the general notion of a characteristically Christian philosophy—the work of reason elevated by faith—for although faith seems to have been indispensable for the mediaeval discovery of truths not known to the ancient pagans, the truths, once discovered, are possessed by reason and can, therefore, be made acceptable to the reason of modern pagans. For the most part, Christian philosophy, because its truths are rational, can be taught to pagans even though it could not have been initially developed by them. There is, however, one profound limitation on the foregoing statement, which is crucially relevant to the present undertaking, namely, the fact that Christian moral philosophy is not, and cannot be, purely a possession of reason, because as practical wisdom it is necessarily guided by faith and subalternated to moral theology. (M. Maritain has completely analyzed this point in *Science and Wisdom*, New York, 1940: Part II).

The doctrines of humankind's fall, redemption, and salvation are theological, not philosophical. Since in the practical order we are concerned with ends and means, we cannot neglect the difference between the end as declared by faith and as known by natural reason; nor can we ignore the fact that natural means are insufficient for a supernatural end; they may not even be sufficient for a natural end, if the "natural human being'' is a hypothetical creature who does not exist. But even though a purely natural moral philosophy is not the whole truth, taken *theoretically*, and even though a purely rational morality may be *practically* false because of its theoretic inadequacy, we must nevertheless begin our dialectical undertaking with what reason *alone* can accomplish. If we succeed in winning the moral skeptics to the path of reason, and if we take them with us as far as reason can go, it *will* then be time enough to ask where we are; for *then*, as *not now*, they may be willing and prepared to consider the relation of theology to philosophy, of faith to reason, in the practical order. The reader should, therefore, understand why our present objective is the induction of Greek, and not *distinctively* Christian, moral principles. Return

2. I am not forgetting that this process cannot occur, *today*, in exactly the same mood or manner as in the Middle Ages. Since the aim is certainly not just to repeat the mediaeval construction, we must attempt further and more detailed analyses, and these must take account of every genuine advance in knowledge, and every sound critical insight, which the modern world has gained. We may even find it necessary to tear down some parts of the mediaeval building and to reconstruct it, in order to let modern light in, to ventilate it properly and to make it truly habitable by a modern mind. And in emphasizing here the demonstrative and expository

character of such constructive, or reconstructive, work, I do not mean to exclude dialectical procedures entirely, for they are necessarily involved. But the kind of dialectic by which a living Thomism continues to grow is mediaeval rather than Greek in type—that is, it is not primary and inductive but secondary and auxiliary to the deeper penetration of truths already known. Return

3. Here, too, there is a difference in the mood and manner in which a similar task is undertaken; for whereas Aristotle was genuinely exploring the philosophical field by dialectical methods, and discovering truths by inductive procedures, we are not learning these elementary truths for the first time, but rather are trying to teach them to a world which denies their possibility. We must, therefore, use the dialectical method and the inductive procedure as instruments of instruction rather than of discovery. It is highly probable, of course, that what occurs as a discovery of truth for those whom we try to teach may be more than a mere re-discovery for us, the teachers. Since the cultural context of the modern world is different, since the steps we must take in reaching the same truths are not precisely those which Aristotle took, the truths themselves may be seen in a new light; and it is even possible that, as a result of such efforts, new truths may be discovered. Return

4. It should be noted that what is being denied is not politics as one of the social sciences, but politics as a branch of practical, or moral philosophy. Return

5. They are regarded as regulative disciplines, as formal sciences, whereas the natural and social sciences are regarded as sciences of the real, even though the only reality be phenomenal. Return

6. Two other denials are implicit here: (1) the denial of a natural moral law, in consequence of which morality becomes entirely conventional; and (2) the denial that moral judgments are expressions of reason, rather than of will or passion. Return

7. In This Pre-War Generation, Chapter 1, *Reforming Education: The Opening of the American Mind*, (Edited by Geraldine Van Doren), Macmillan Publishing, New York, (1977). Return

8. The neglect or denial of what, in contrast, I would call philosophical psychology results in the denial or, what is just as bad, the misconception of mans rationality and freedom. The relevance of such denials or misconceptions to moral skepticism will become apparent in the course of the dialectic. Return

9. This can be most strikingly exemplified by the position of those political scientists who are willing to urge us to fight for democracy, but who refuse to argue that the principles of democracy are intrinsically, and absolutely, right, or even objectively better than the principles of totalitarianism. Adopting the views of *realpolitik*, they must regard this issue as nothing more than a struggle between "ideologies"—the one to which we are devoted not being objectively better than the other, but better-for-us because it is ours by the accident of cultural location.

Let me add here that all the facts of cultural anthropology must be admitted. The moral skeptic often supposes these facts to be absolutely incompatible with the position that some moral judgments are true for all people everywhere. But this is not the case. The truths of moral philosophy, the principles of ethics and politics, do not require us to shut our eyes to any facts about human life and human society. The precise relation between the universality and absoluteness of moral truth, on the one hand, and the diversity and relativity of the *mores*, on the other hand will become apparent, I hope, in the course of the dialectic. Return

10. The position of Thrasymachus in *The Republic*, and the views attributed to Protagoras and other sophists, in the writings of Plato and Aristotle, are perfect expressions of moral skepticism. Although the thing we call "positivism" is typically modern, because it arises in modern times with the gradual distinction of science from philosophy, there is a Greek analogue in so far as the sophists were not total skeptics. All but the most extreme among them, such as Cratylus, were willing to admit that we had knowledge of the physical world; in fact, they used such knowledge to make their point that in moral matters only opinions prevailed. They were fond of saying that fire burns in the same way in both Greece and Persia, both a hundred years ago and today, but the laws of Greece and Persia are not the same nor are the customs of antiquity and of the present. Of nature, because it is nature and has a persistent uniformity independent of human will, there can be knowledge, but there can be only opinions on moral matters, because they are not natural, because they are entirely conventional, entirely dependent on human institution, entirely expressions of will. The sophists knew a great deal about the variety of customs; obviously impressed by the relativity of *mores*, they made the same false supposition that is made today, namely, the incompatibility of such facts with the possibility of universal moral principles.

Finally, it can even be said that the sophists' view of human nature, without benefit of experimental research or clinical investigation, emphasized, as does our current scientific psychology, the will or

passions, rather than the reason, and made the sensitive faculty the primary, if not the exclusive, principle of human knowledge. The main points of this analogy between the ancient sophists and the contemporary moral skeptics is confirmed, from the other side, by the late Professor F. C. S. Schiller, the follower of William James and John Dewey who, more explicitly than they, avowed the moral skepticism which is implicit in pragmatism. cf. his essay, "From Plato to Protagoras" in which Schiller sides with Protagoras (in *Studies in Humanism*, N. Y., 1907: Ch. II). Return

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