THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Nov '10 N° 596

THE VOCATION OF PHILOSOPHY

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Philosophy has been my vocation since 1917 when at the age of fifteen (and before going to college), I made the acquaintance of Socrates by reading Plato's *Euthyphro.* I was stung to the quick as a result of learning from John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography* that he had read all of Plato's dialogues in Greek by the age of five, and here I was fifteen.

For seventy-five years I have been driven by the love and pursuit of philosophical truth—the truth that can be discovered by reflection and thought, without moving out of an armchair or while sitting at a desk, not the truth sought by scientific research or historical scholarship. Unlike the other activities that I have reported in earlier chapters—educational reform, editorial work, and Aspen Institute functions (activities in which I have been engaged at different periods of my life)—teaching and learning

and the pursuit of philosophical truth have been lifelong occupations.

The philosophical books I have written since *Dialectic* in 1927 do not conform to my present conception of how philosophical books should be written. With the possible exception of the extensive notes that I appended to *What Man Has Made of Man* in 1937 and of *A Dialectic of Morals: Towards the Foundations of Political Philosophy* (1941), the other books written before 1976 were written mainly for an academic audience, though I unsuccessfully tried to write them also for the general run of readers who might have enough curiosity about philosophy to read them.

It was not until 1965, when I wrote *The Conditions of Philosophy,* based on lectures that I delivered at the University of Chicago, that I arrived at a mature understanding of the line that divided philosophical thought from mathematics, from the investigative, empirical sciences, and from historical research. However I find clear anticipations of that understanding in the most important notes that I added to *What Man Has Made of Man* in 1937.[1]

I also find anticipations of another book that was based on University of Chicago lectures *The Difference of Man and the Difference It Makes,* (1967) in the notes appended to the earlier book. The same is true in the field of practical (i.e., moral and political) philosophy. The aforementioned *A Dialectic of Morals* anticipates two more books that were based on University of Chicago lectures: *The Time of Our Lives: The Ethics of Common Sense* (1970) and *The Common Sense of Politics* (1971).

Though my understanding of philosophy had matured in the four books I wrote from 1965 to 1971, I still had not achieved the right style for writing philosophical books. I was still trying to write them with all the paraphernalia of footnotes and extensive scholarly bibliographies to win the attention of a professorial audience, while at the same time trying to use the language of ordinary speech and avoiding so far as possible all technical jar-

[1] *What Man Has Made of Man* was based on four lectures that I gave at the Institute for Psychoanalysis in Chicago in the spring of 1936. The subtitle of the book, when it was published in 1937, was "A Study of the Consequences of Platonism and Positivism in Psychology," which showed why I felt it necessary to add 100 pages of notes to the book when I prepared for publication the four lectures that I had given to the assembled psychoanalysts. In an Epilogue to the book, I said that I wrote the foregoing 62 Notes as a philosophical—and Aristotelian—commentary on the errors of Platonism and positivism. At the end of the book, I presented an itemized inventory of the 62 Notes. I have placed this inventory as Item A in the Notes appended to this chapter.

gon. This double effort on my part fell between two stools. The books were too complicated for the general reader and, for reasons I shall mention later, they were seldom reviewed in the technical philosophical periodicals.

I resolved this dilemma by the time I wrote *Aristotle for Everybody* in 1978. If, as this book declares in its opening pages, philosophy is everybody's business and is not the special province of university professors of philosophy and their graduate students, then philosophical books should be written in a style that is popular—intended for the general public, not for professors of philosophy. The latter have wrongly dismissed these later books of mine as "popularizations" of philosophy, which they are not.

Philosophy is the only academic subject listed in college and university catalogues that, in varying degrees, should be the vocation of everyone.[2] Everyone should not aim to be a mathematician, a physicist, a molecular biologist, an economist, or an historian. These and most other subjects listed in college and university catalogues are fields of academic specialization as philosophy has, unfortunately, also become in the twentieth century. Unlike all these fields of specialization, philosophy, properly understood, is the vocation of all thinking human beings who confront fundamental problems and issues about the world in which they live, about human society, and about themselves and their place in nature. If confronting these problems, they are inclined to think about them, they are involved in philosophical thought.

It is this fact that distinguishes the seven or eight major philosophical books I have written since *Aristotle for Everybody* in 1978 from the books written by professors of philosophy in the same period. The books they have written, like the articles they write for the technical journals of philosophy, are written for their peers (i.e., other professors of philosophy). In contrast, the books I have written attempt to restore philosophy to its proper place in our society and culture.

In the twenty-five centuries of Western philosophical thought, it is only recently, with Kant and other German philosophers after

[2]The only other vocation that resembles philosophy in being the vocation of everyone is that of being a humanist. Both aim at making us generalists rather than specialists.

him, that philosophical books were written by men who held university professorships of philosophy.[3] I do not think that I would, or could, have written the books I have produced since 1978 had I been a professorial philosopher, concerned with the esteem of other professors of the subject. Instead, philosophy has been my lifelong vocation and I have at last learned how to write, not for professors of philosophy, but for other human beings who have the same vocation in some degree.

2

The phrase "common sense" in the titles of books that I wrote in the late 1960s indicates why philosophy is everybody's business—a common human vocation. Philosophical reflection about what we all know by common sense deepens and enriches our understanding of our common-sense knowledge. It seldom runs counter to or challenges common sense; it almost always enlarges it. That is why philosophical discourse should always use the language of common speech and avoid, wherever possible, all technical jargon.

I learned this from George Santayana fairly early in my life. In his *Skepticism and Animal Faith,* the following passage occurs.

> For good or ill, I am an ignorant man, almost a poet, and I can only spread a feast of what everybody knows. Fortunately exact science and the books of the learned are not necessary to establish my essential doctrine, nor can any of them claim a higher warrant than it has in itself: for it rests on public experience. It needs, to prove it, only the stars, the seasons, the swarm of animals, the spectacle of birth and death, of cities and wars. My philosophy is justified, and has been justified in all ages and countries, by the facts before every man's eyes. . . . In the past or in the future, my language and my borrowed knowledge would have been different, but under whatever sky I had been born, since it is the same sky, I should have had the same philosophy.[4]

This insight about the relation of philosophy to common sense was later confirmed for me when I read Jacques Maritain's *Introduction to Philosophy,* in which he pointed out that this was what distinguished being an Aristotelian. I had this in mind when

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[3] Though not professorial by occupation, the great philosophers of earlier epochs (e.g., Plato, Aristotle, Epictetus, Descartes, Spinoza, and Locke) did- not write their books for an academic audience, as most modern professors of philosophy, but neither did most of them write for the general public.

[4] George Santayana: *Skepticism and Animal Faith,* New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923, pp, ix—x. Before Santayana, William James made somewhat the same point in *Pragmatism* (1908).

I wrote *Aristotle for Everybody* and declared that Aristotle was the only one of the great philosophers whose thinking was for everybody because of its relation to what everyone knows by common sense. This could not be said of Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer.

Where Santayana refers to public experience as the empirical basis of his philosophical thought, I used the term "common experience" in *The Conditions of Philosophy* to make the same point; for it is our common human experience that is the source of our common-sense knowledge.

By "common experience" I had in mind two things. In the first place, it is the experience all of us have every day of our waking, conscious lives, as distinguished from the special experience that investigative scientists have when they collect the data of research they find in response to the specific questions that govern their investigations. Our everyday common experience does not occur in answer to controlling questions of any kind. *In the second place,* it is "common" in the sense that, at its core, it is the same for all human beings at any time or place.

3

One professor of philosophy and member of the American Philosophical Association, Paul Weiss, has commented favorably on my philosophical books.[5] That may be explained by the fact that Paul and I are old friends, going back to the 1920s when he and I wrote for *The New Republic* and the *Nation* respectively, the only adversely critical reviews of Will Durant's *Story of Philosophy*. When Paul became a professor of philosophy at Bryn Mawr College and at Yale University, he invited me to give lectures to his students there.

As I have already pointed out, my books have been dismissed out of hand by the professorial philosophers in our secular universities, either because they are deemed mere popularizations having no technical merit, or because they are so Aristotelian in

[5] There are a few other exceptions to which I should call attention. In this country, at the instigation of Jacques Barzun, Professor Charles Hartshorne of the University of Texas at Austin wrote a commentary article about my philosophical work for *The American Scholar* (Spring 1972). And in the United Kingdom, I have received favor- able comments from Anthony Quinton when he was fellow of New College, Oxford, and later President of Trinity College; and also from Professor Maurice Cranston of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

tenor, or simply because I am not a member of the professorial fraternity and so can be disregarded. It cannot be because what I have written is manifestly misguided and erroneous or because I have not considered their professorial opinions and dealt critically with them.

My recent philosophical books have been acknowledged to have merit by fellow Aristotelians and Thomists in the American Catholic Philosophical Association. They know that I am not a Roman Catholic, though in the period that I wrote articles and books that commented on the thought of Thomas Aquinas, I became a member of the American Catholic Philosophical Association in 1932 and participated in its meetings, not always to good effect. My articles and books were thought by the conventional orthodox Thomists of that day to be radically and unreasonably revisionist on points of Thomistic doctrine.

In 1976, I was awarded the Aquinas medal by the American Catholic Philosophical Association. I believe that I am the only individual to receive that award who was not a Roman Catholic and was also not a university professor of philosophy.

The recipient of the award is expected to make a brief response when given the medal. Mine was entitled "The Bodyguards of Truth" and, in summary fashion, pointed out the ancient truths that should be borne in mind to safeguard us against errors in modern philosophical thought that have occurred as a result of either ignoring or misunderstanding the cumulative wisdom of antiquity and the Middle Ages. Since the first part of my address on that occasion was autobiographical, I think it fitting to reproduce its opening paragraphs below.

> My serious study of [philosophical thought] 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."
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> 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. 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 faced by Aristotle himself.
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> 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, and from Jacques Maritain as a student of them both. 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. 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. 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.[6]

In the next section of the address, I went on to talk about what I had learned from studying the history of philosophy. This is also autobiographical and I think it worth reproducing below.

> 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. Such efforts on my part, may I say in passing, especially essays and books that criticized the traditional theory of species, the traditional view of democracy, and traditional formulations of the proofs of God's existence, were not universally applauded in the late thirties and early forties by my fellow-members in the American Catholic Philosophical Association. Whether, if reviewed today, they would be differently appraised, I cannot say. To win tolerance for such fault-finding, I did try to say then, as I would say now, that 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 Tho-

[6] Adler, "The Bodyguards of Truth," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association,* 1976, p. 125. Reprinted by permission.

mistic 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.

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. 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. 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 is 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, as Aristotle and Aquinas so well knew, have such serious consequences in the end.

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

The genuine problems to which I am referring are questions that have been generated under the cultural circumstances characteristic of modern times, especially the effect on philosophy of its gradually recognized distinction from investigative science and from dogmatic theology, as well as the effect on it of certain developments in modern science and certain revolutionary changes in the institutions of modern society.

The profit to be derived from the perception of these problems (of which Aristotle and Aquinas were not aware or were only dimly aware) is the stimulus it gives us to try to extend their thought in response to them. I have always found that I could solve such problems 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 nev-

> ertheless do provide us with the clues or leads needed for discovering the answers.
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> Many years ago, in our early days together at the University of Chicago, my friend Professor Richard McKeon once quipped that the difference between the members of the American Philosophical Association and the members of the American Catholic Philosophical Association was that philosophers in our secular universities specialized in very good and novel questions, to which the scholastic philosophers did not yet have the answers, whereas the scholastics had a rich supply of true principles and conclusions but usually failed to be aware of many important questions to the answering of which they could be applied. My own experience has confirmed the wisdom as well as the wit of that observation. . .[7]

In recent years I joined the American Maritain Association, motivated by my indebtedness to Jacques Maritain, from whose books I have learned so much, as well as from my personal association with him when he visited the University of Chicago and when he became associated with the Institute for Philosophical Research.

In 1987, the Maritain Association held a three-day symposium, entitled "Freedom in the Modern World," in which various participants read papers on the contributions to that subject by Jacques Maritain, Yves R. Simon (a student of Maritain, who has written many books of philosophical magnitude and merit), and Mortimer J. Adler.

I would be glad to report here if I could, all that was said about my two-volume work, *The Idea of Freedom,* the first product of the Institute for Philosophical Research. That took eight years of work to produce; the first volume was published in 1958; the second in 1961.

One address at that symposium does have a direct bearing on matters here being considered, particularly the Roman Catholic evaluation of my contribution to philosophy, so different from the evaluation of me by professors of philosophy in our secular universities. That was an address by Professor Ralph McInerny, entitled "Adler on Freedom." Most of that address was not about

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[7] Ibid., pp. 125-126.

Adler on Freedom, but about Adler as a philosopher.[8] I hope I may be excused the immodest delight that I took in the judgment of me that Professor McInerny delivered, as well as in the stories he told about me. His address is too long to reproduce here, or even to excerpt here, so I have placed an excerpt from it as Item B in the Notes to the chapter.

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE
published weekly for its members by the
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS
Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann
Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor
Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist
A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.
Donations are tax deductable as the law allows.

[8] Ralph Mclnerny: "Adler on Freedom," in *Freedom in the Modern World* (Jacques Maritain, Yves R. Simon, Mortimer J. Adler), edited by Michael D. Torre, American Maritain Association, Notre Dame, Ind., University of Notre Dame Press, 1989, pp. 65-72. Reprinted by permission.