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## MODERN SCIENCE AND ANCIENT WISDOM

**Mortimer Adler**

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THE OUTSTANDING ACHIEVEMENT and intellectual glory of modern times has been empirical science and the mathematics that it has put to such good use. The progress it has made in the last three centuries, together with the technological advances that have resulted therefrom, are breathtaking.

The equally great achievement and intellectual glory of Greek antiquity and of the Middle Ages was philosophy. We have inherited from those epochs a fund of accumulated wisdom. That, too, is breathtaking, especially when one considers how little philosophical progress has been made in modern times.

This is not to say that no advances in philosophical thought have occurred in the last three hundred years. They are mainly in logic, in the philosophy of science, and in political theory, not in metaphysics, in the philosophy of nature, or in the philosophy of mind, and least of all in moral philosophy. Nor is it true to say that, in

Greek antiquity and in the later Middle Ages, from the fourteenth century on, science did not prosper at all. On the contrary, the foundations were laid in mathematics, in mathematical physics, in biology, and in medicine.

It is in metaphysics, the philosophy of nature, the philosophy of mind, and moral philosophy that the ancients and their mediaeval successors did more than lay the foundations for the sound understanding and the modicum of wisdom we possess. They did not make the philosophical mistakes that have been the ruination of modern thought. On the contrary, they had the insights and made the indispensable distinctions that provide us with the means for correcting these mistakes.

At its best, investigative science gives us knowledge of reality. As I have argued earlier in this book, philosophy is, at the very least, also knowledge of reality, not mere opinion. Much better than that, it is knowledge illuminated by understanding. At its best, it approaches wisdom, both speculative and practical.

Precisely because science is investigative and philosophy is not, one should not be surprised by the remarkable progress in science and by the equally remarkable lack of it in philosophy. Precisely because philosophy is based upon the common experience of mankind and is a refinement and elaboration of the common-sense knowledge and understanding that derives from reflection on that common experience, philosophy came to maturity early and developed beyond that point only slightly and slowly.

Scientific knowledge changes, grows, improves, expands, as a result of refinements in and accretions to the special experience—the observational data—on which science as an investigative mode of inquiry must rely. Philosophical knowledge is not subject to the same conditions of change or growth. Common experience, or more precisely, the general lineaments or common core of that experience, which suffices for the philosopher, remains relatively constant over the ages.

Descartes and Hobbes in the seventeenth century, Locke, Hume, and Kant in the eighteenth century, and Alfred North Whitehead and Bertrand Russell in the twentieth century enjoy no greater advantages in this respect than Plato and Aristotle in antiquity or than Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and Roger Bacon in the Middle Ages.

## 2

How might modern thinkers have avoided the philosophical mistakes that have been so disastrous in their consequences? In earlier chapters I have suggested the answer. Finding a prior philosopher's conclusions untenable, the thing to do is to go back to his starting point and see if he has made a little error in the beginning.

A striking example of the failure to follow this rule is to be found in Kant's response to Hume. Hume's skeptical conclusions and his phenomenalism were unacceptable to Kant, even though they awoke him from his own dogmatic slumbers. But instead of looking for little errors in the beginning that were made by Hume and then dismissing them as the cause of the Humean conclusions that he found unacceptable, Kant thought it necessary to construct a vast piece of philosophical machinery designed to produce conclusions of an opposite tenor.

The intricacy of the apparatus and the ingenuity of the design cannot help but evoke admiration, even from those who are suspicious of the sanity of the whole enterprise and who find it necessary to reject Kant's conclusions as well as Hume's. Though they are opposite in tenor, they do not help us to get at the truth, which can only be found by correcting Hume's little errors in the beginning, and the little errors made by Locke and Descartes before that. To do that one must be in the possession of insights and distinctions with which these modern thinkers were unacquainted. Why they were, I will try to explain presently.

What I have just said about Kant in relation to Hume applies also to the whole tradition of British empirical philosophy from Hobbes, Locke, and Hume on. All of the philosophical puzzles, paradoxes, and pseudo-problems that linguistic and analytical philosophy and therapeutic positivism in our own century have tried to eliminate would never have arisen in the first place if the little errors in the beginning made by Locke and Hume had been explicitly rejected instead of going unnoticed.

How did those little errors in the beginning arise in the first place? One answer is that something which needed to be known or understood had not yet been discovered or learned. Such mistakes are excusable, however regrettable they may be.

The second answer is that the errors are made as a result of culpable ignorance—ignorance of an essential point, an indispensable

insight or distinction, that has already been discovered and expounded.

It is mainly in the second way that modern philosophers have made their little errors in the beginning. They are ugly monuments to the failures of education—failures due, on the one hand, to corruptions in the tradition of learning and, on the other hand, to an antagonistic attitude toward or even contempt for the past, for the achievements of those who have come before.

### 3

Ten years ago, in 1974-1975, I wrote my autobiography, an intellectual biography entitled *Philosopher at Large*. As I now reread its concluding chapter, I can see the substance of this book emerging from what I wrote there.

I frankly confessed my commitment to Aristotle's philosophical wisdom, both speculative and practical, and to that of his great disciple Thomas Aquinas. The essential insights and the indispensable distinctions needed to correct the philosophical mistakes made in modern times are to be found in their thought.

Some things said in the concluding chapter of that book bear repetition here in the concluding chapter of this book. Since I cannot improve upon what I wrote ten years ago, I shall excerpt and paraphrase what I said then.

In the eyes of my contemporaries the label "Aristotelian" has dyslogistic connotations. It has had such connotations since the beginning of modern times. 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.

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. 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.

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. 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 Aristotle's error and deficiencies while embracing the truths he is able to teach.

Even granting that it is possible to be an Aristotelian without being doctrinaire about it, it remains the case that being an Aristotelian 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." I know, for example, that many of my contemporaries were outraged by my statement that Aristotle's *Ethics* is a unique book in the Western tradition of moral philosophy, the only ethics that is sound, practical, and undogmatic.

If a similar statement 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, it would be received without raised eyebrows or shaking heads. For example, in this century it has been said again and again, and gone unchallenged, that Bertrand Russell's theory of descriptions has been crucially pivotal in the philosophy of language; but it simply will not do for me to make exactly the same statement about the Aristotelian and Thomistic theory of signs (adding that it puts Russell's theory of descriptions into better perspective than the current view of it does).

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.

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, nor 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.

I must say once more that in philosophy, both speculative and practical, few if any advances have been made in modern times. 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.

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.

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, although 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. 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.

Proceeding, therefore, in ignorance or misunderstanding of truths that could have been found in the funded tradition of almost two thousand years of Western thought, these modern philosophers made crucial mistakes in their points of departure and in their initial postulates. The commission of these errors can be explained in part by antagonism toward the past, and even contempt for it.

The explanation of the antagonism lies in the character of the teachers under whom these modern philosophers studied in their youth. These teachers did not pass on the philosophical tradition as a living thing by recourse to the writings of the great philosophers of the past. They did not read and comment on the works of Aristotle, for example, as the great teachers of the thirteenth century did.

Instead, the decadent scholastics who occupied teaching posts in the universities of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries fossil-


ized the tradition by presenting it in a deadly, dogmatic fashion, using a jargon that concealed, rather than conveyed, the insights it contained. Their lectures must have been as wooden and uninspiring as most textbooks or 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.

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 damage by turning to the texts of Aristotle or Aquinas in their mature years and by reading them perceptively and critically.

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.

With very few exceptions, such misunderstanding and ignorance of philosophical achievements made prior to the sixteenth century have been the besetting sin of modern thought. 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 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 premodern predecessors, unknown to him, have thrown great light.

Modern philosophy has never recovered from its false starts. 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 path by Descartes, Locke, and Hume.

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. 

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