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## PHILOSOPHY'S PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

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Part 2 of 4

First and most important of all, there was in antiquity no clear line between philosophy, on the one hand, and either science or religion, on the other. The ancients did not clearly and explicitly separate questions that cannot be answered *without* investigation from questions that cannot possibly be answered *by* investigation. As a consequence of this, Aristotle treated, as if they were properly philosophical questions, questions that can be properly answered only by investigative science—questions about the nature and motions of the heavenly bodies; questions about the nature, number, and operation of the human senses; questions about the elementary forms of matter; questions about the species of living things, their order, relation, and origin.

Many of the treatises of Aristotle show him dealing with what we

now know to be philosophical questions, on the one hand, and scientific questions, on the other; but he treats them as if they were all philosophical questions. A great many of the errors with which Aristotle is charged were made in his effort to answer scientific questions without being aware that they require a different method from the one he employed in answering questions that are genuinely philosophical.

This is not to say that he failed to resort to investigation in certain fields, especially in biology. We know that he was an investigative scientist as well as a reflective philosopher; but *he* did not know it. He did not separate—and, in his day, probably could not have separated—these two modes of inquiry in which he engaged, as we, looking back at him, can retrospectively separate his efforts at scientific inquiry from his lines of philosophical thought.

This, then, is one of the misfortunes of philosophy in antiquity: by virtue of the inchoate togetherness of science and philosophy, philosophy took upon itself a burden that it could not discharge—the burden of answering questions that did not properly belong in its domain. We can see the particular sciences—such as physics, astronomy, chemistry, physiology, and zoology—in the womb of ancient philosophy.

Philosophy is, historically, their mother; but they have not yet broken away from her and established themselves as branches of a separate autonomous discipline, the discipline of investigative science. Until this happens—and it does not begin to happen until the seventeenth century—they constitute a burden and a distraction to philosophy; worse than that, the errors which philosophers make in unwittingly trying to deal with matters that properly belong to science insidiously affect their treatment of matters that are properly their own concern.

What I have just said about science and philosophy in antiquity can also be said about science and religion; they were also inchoately confused. The ancients did not realize that certain questions were of a sort that exceeded the powers of human inquiry to answer—questions that could not be answered either by investigation or by reflection on the common experience of humankind. Both Plato and Aristotle tried, as philosophers, to handle such questions—Plato in the *Timaeus*, *Phaedo*, and *Laws*; Aristotle in the eighth book of the *Physics*, the twelfth book of the *Metaphysics*, and the tenth book of the *Ethics*. Certain matters treated therein are matters beyond the reach of testable *doxa*. If men are ever to possess knowledge of such matters, it must come to them by way of divine

revelation and supernatural faith. They cannot acquire it by the exercise of their natural faculties and by recourse to the evidences of experience and the light of unaided reason.<sup>1</sup>

The confusion of philosophy with religion in antiquity has still another unfortunate consequence. Religion, as we have seen, is more than a type of knowledge; it is a group of institutions, a set of ceremonial or ritualistic practices, and a code of observances and performances having a sacerdotal or sacramental character. When these things are taken together, they comprise what we understand by “a way of life.” When we speak of religion as a way of life, we think of it as enrolling the individual in a community who share certain beliefs, engage in certain ceremonials or rituals, and practice certain obligatory observances. A religious way of life can, of course, be lived anchoritically as well as communally, but it still involves more than beliefs; it involves observances and actions of a sacerdotal or sacramental character, observances and actions that have as their goal a spiritual transformation of some sort. Whatever the nature of that goal, one thing is clear: the goal of the religious way of life is not simply more knowledge of the type which the religious person already has.

This last point confirms what should be otherwise clear—namely, that such disciplines as scientific investigation and historical research, as we understand them today, are not, strictly speaking, ways of life in the sense in which religion is. Scientists and historians may belong to learned societies; they may have codes of professional behavior; they may engage in certain practices; but all these, taken together, have only one end in view, and that is the advancement of knowledge, knowledge of exactly the same type that they already possess to some extent.

What has just been said about science and history must be said with equal force about philosophy when we understand it as a comparable branch of knowledge and mode of inquiry. Whatever the rules for the conduct of philosophy as an intellectual enterprise, and whatever code of professional behavior philosophers should subscribe to, these, as in the case of science and history, have only one aim—the advancement of knowledge, the same type of knowledge that philosophers already possess to some degree. Phi-

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<sup>1</sup>The line separating the domain of philosophy from the domain of dogmatic theology and revealed religion was clearly drawn only toward the end of the Christian Middle Ages. Some of the speculations of Plato and Aristotle about theological matters lie athwart the line that separates metaphysical theology (which is a part of philosophy) from dogmatic theology (which belongs to revealed religion).

osophy is, therefore, no more a way of life than science or history.<sup>2</sup>

Both Plato and Aristotle were bewitched by the conception of philosophy as *epistemé*—as something much more certain and incorrigible than opinion because it is grounded in incontestable, self-evident axioms or first principles, and proceeds therefrom to demonstrate its conclusions. Both Plato and Aristotle drew a sharp line between knowledge and opinion (*nous* and *epistemé*, on the one hand, and *doxa*, on the other), and they both placed mathematics and philosophy on the knowledge side of the line. This misfortune, at the very beginning of philosophy's history, plagues it throughout its history, not only in antiquity, but also in the Middle Ages and in modern times.

The subsequent history of philosophical thought was grievously influenced by the exaltation and idealization of knowledge (*nous* and *epistemé*) over the best that can be achieved in the realm of opinion (*doxa*). Later philosophers, whether they agreed or disagreed with the substance of Platonic or Aristotelian teaching, adopted the ideal of *nous* and *epistemé* as one to be aimed at in philosophical work. Some of them went much further and did what Plato and Aristotle refrained from doing; they expounded their own philosophical thought in a form and with a structure that made it look as if it conformed to the ideal.

If subsequent ages had paid more attention to the actual sifting of philosophical opinions that goes on in the dialogues of Plato, and had recognized that the *Posterior Analytics* does not describe the structure or movement of philosophical thought as it occurs in all the major treatises of Aristotle, philosophy might have been saved many centuries of misdirection in the fruitless effort to conform itself to an appropriate model.

The third misfortune that befell philosophy in antiquity is closely connected with the second. It is the baleful influence of mathematics, mainly in the form of geometry.

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<sup>2</sup>A simple test can be applied. A truly religious person deplores his own moral failings and tries to rectify them in order to bring his character and conduct more into accord with the precepts and practices of his religion. But a scientist, historical scholar, and philosopher may each recognize that he has certain moral deficiencies without any sense of need to overcome them for the sake of serving better the objectives of scientific research, historical scholarship, or philosophical thought. This is one way of seeing that religion is a way of life and that science, history, and philosophy are not.

Geometry provided the ancients with what they took to be the model of a deductive system. When Plato and Aristotle want to exemplify what they mean by *epistemé*, they usually offer the demonstration of geometrical theorems. Again it must be said in defense of Plato and Aristotle that they never made the mistake of Spinoza and other moderns, who actually try to expound a philosophical theory *in ordine geometrico*. Yet we cannot overlook the frequency with which they point to geometry as an actually developed body of knowledge that approximates their ideal better than any other and which, therefore, serves as a model to be imitated.

The bewitchment of philosophy by mathematics—not only by geometrical demonstration, but also by the analytical character of mathematical thought—is a much more serious illness of philosophy in modern times than it was in antiquity. Nevertheless, the first signs of that illness can be found in antiquity, not only in connection with the illusions about *epistemé*, but also in the extensive use that Plato makes of geometrical figures and of numbers as exemplary forms.

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### THE DISORDERS OF PHILOSOPHY IN THE MIDDLE AGES

After the first flowering of philosophy in Greece in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., there is a long period of sterility and stagnation. This is not to say that the fifteen hundred years from the end of the fourth century B.C. to the eleventh century of the Christian era are totally devoid of substantive contributions to philosophical thought. The Stoics, Epicureans, and Neo-Platonists of the Hellenistic period add to the stock of philosophical theories and arguments, as do some of the early fathers of the church, especially Saint Augustine. However, looking at what happened in procedural terms, we find no development of the philosophical enterprise as such, no refinement of method, no clarification of purpose, no sharpening of boundary lines, no clearer definition of philosophical objectives.

From the perspective of this survey of philosophy's history—looking for self-understanding on the part of philosophy—the long period that follows Plato and Aristotle adds little or nothing. If anything, there is a loss of energy and clarity. Philosophy is done in a lower key and without the conscious effort at self-examination—the effort to philosophize about philosophy itself—that distinguishes the work of Plato and Aristotle.

Beginning in the middle or at the end of the eleventh century, and

running to the end of the thirteenth or the middle of the fourteenth century, there is another brief period in which philosophy takes new steps forward, especially in the direction of ordering itself in relation to religion and theology. Unhappily, these gains also involve new disorders. Let us look first at the positive side of the picture.

We need not judge the validity of Christianity's claim to possess, in the Old and New Testaments, the revealed word of God in order to see how the theological effort to understand revealed truth—the dogmas of the Christian faith—not only stimulated philosophical thought, but also relieved it of a burden.

I shall refer to philosophical thought that is stimulated and enlightened by the exigencies and intellectual demands of Christian faith as Christian philosophizing. The faithful refer, instead, to Christian philosophy and mean, by that term, philosophical thought carried on in the light of faith and elevated or rectified thereby.

In order not to beg the question about the validity of this conception of a Christianized philosophy, inwardly transformed by the admixture of faith with reason, I shall use the phrase "Christian philosophizing" to call attention to the fact that something happened to philosophy when it became involved in the effort to construct a rational system of dogmatic theology in order to explain, so far as that is possible, the articles of Christian faith.

What happened was an extension of the scope of philosophical inquiry by the introduction of new questions—questions that did not occur to Plato and Aristotle, and probably could not have been formulated by them in the terms or with the precision to be found in Christian philosophizing. The most obvious example of this is the whole discussion of the freedom of the will, occasioned by the need to assess man's responsibility for sin, both original and acquired, and complicated by the doctrines of divine grace, foreknowledge, and predestination.

Though Saint Augustine and later mediaeval thinkers find much to draw upon in the writings of Plato and Aristotle with regard to other philosophical problems, they develop their elaborate doctrine of free will almost from scratch. Plato and Aristotle appear to take man's freedom of choice as an obvious fact of experience; they offer no analysis or defense of free will; it was not for them a problem, full of thorny issues, as it was for Christian philosophizing.

Another example involves the contrast between the treatment of

time and eternity and the approach to the problem of the world's having or not having a beginning, as these things are discussed in Plato's *Timaeus* or Aristotle's *Physics*, Book VIII, and as they are expounded in the theological doctrine of the world's creation by God. While the last is strictly theological, ultimately based on the opening words of Genesis, it influences the philosophizing that is done within the framework or in the context of dogmatic theology. It leads Christian philosophizing to raise questions about the real distinction between essence and existence, about the difference between time and eternity, and about the causation of being or existence as compared with the causation of becoming, change, or motion. These questions do not appear in the corpus of Greek thought.

Still another example involves the refinement in later Christian philosophizing of the Aristotelian conception of substance and accident, essence and existence, matter and form, occasioned by the difficulties encountered in the theological employment of these conceptions to deal with the three great mysteries of the Christian faith—the mystery of the Trinity, the mystery of the Incarnation, and the mystery of the Eucharist.

Greek philosophers could not draw a sharp line between the domains of philosophy and religion. They could not separate questions that were answerable in the light of reason and experience from questions that were answerable only in the light of faith. In consequence, philosophy unwittingly assumed tasks it was not competent to discharge.

That burden persisted in the first phase of Christian philosophizing, during which men engaged in the fruitless effort to demonstrate the dogmas of the Christian faith as if they were philosophical conclusions. Instead of saying that the burden persisted, I should perhaps have said that it grew heavier and that the resulting distraction of philosophy from its own proper tasks became aggravated.

In addition, the excesses of rationalism on the part of philosophers such as Peter Abelard, who tried to bite off religious matters that they could not chew, generated a reaction on the part of theologians in the opposite direction. Abelard's trying to prove the Trinity is an example of his extreme rationalism.

This resulted in the excess known as fideism, which, instead of telling philosophers to mind their own business, told them that they really had no business of their own to mind—that philosophy had no autonomy as a mode of inquiry, that all important questions

were answered by faith, and that all others represented idle curiosity and the vanity of worldly learning.

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