

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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*Philosophy is Everybody's Business*

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## PHILOSOPHY'S PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

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Part 3 of 4

These opposite excesses, together with their cause—the inappropriate burden that philosophy was still carrying on its back—provoked the effort, in the second phase of Christian philosophizing, to define the spheres of faith and reason and to straighten out the tangled involvement of philosophy with religion.

The work of Thomas Aquinas culminates this effort. Being both a philosopher and a dogmatic theologian, he carefully drew the line that both related philosophy to theology and also separated their domains.

The achievement of Aquinas, in thus relieving philosophy of the burden—the undue tasks and the distractions—of involvement in

religious matters, deserves to rank with the contributions made by Plato and Aristotle to the formation and constitution of the philosophical enterprise.

Before I turn to the negative side of the picture, I must mention one other procedural gain that is made in the later Middle Ages. The universities of the thirteenth century, especially the faculties of Paris and Oxford, instituted public disputations of both philosophical and theological questions. In the *Disputed Questions* and *Quodlibetal Questions* of Aquinas, we have a one-sided record of debates in which he was himself involved, but that record nevertheless reveals a procedure in which philosophers confronted one another, joined issues, and entered into debate.

Problems are taken up in piecemeal fashion; questions are attacked one by one; objections are raised and answered. We have here, then, in these mediaeval disputations, a good procedural model for the conduct of philosophy as a public enterprise. The spirit of this procedure persists in somewhat altered form as late as the seventeenth century, in the philosophical correspondence in which both Leibniz and Spinoza engaged with critics or adversaries, and in the seven sets of objections and replies which Descartes appended to his *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

Some of the things that plagued philosophy in antiquity continued to plague it in the Middle Ages. Though not caused by philosophy's relationship to theology, they were aggravated by it. I have two manifestations of this in mind.

One is the persistence of the illusion about *epistemé*. This was aggravated by philosophy's involvement with dogmatic theology. The latter, rightly or wrongly, made claims to certitude and finality, which had the effect of intensifying philosophy's quest for a kind of perfection in knowledge that it could never attain.

If dogmas and dogmatism are proper anywhere, it is in the theological doctrines that claim to have their foundation in the revealed word of God. While philosophy, strictly speaking, could not claim to have any dogmas or dogmatic foundations, it tried to rival theology with a certitude and finality of its own by giving its principles and conclusions the high status of knowledge in the form of *nous* and *epistemé*.

The other manifestation is the persistence of philosophical efforts to solve, *without investigation*, problems that belong to investigative science. This, too, was aggravated by philosophy's involve-

ment with dogmatic theology, which imbued philosophy with an undue confidence in its powers.

It should be noted here that the well-deserved respect accorded Aristotle during the later Middle Ages often turned into undue reverence and misplaced piety, in consequence of which many of the scientific errors committed by Aristotle acquired the status of unquestionable philosophical truths. When they were questioned by scientific investigators at the end of the Middle Ages, they were defended by specious philosophical reasoning that brought philosophy itself into disrepute.

Though Aquinas tried to convert theology from an absolute monarch into a constitutional ruler and to transform philosophy from a menial into a free and loyal subject, he nevertheless left the two in a hierarchical relationship of superior and inferior. And though Aquinas also tried to relieve philosophy of the questions that are answerable only by faith, he left to philosophy a number of theological questions, about God and the human soul, the answers to which he called “preambles to faith.”

This helps us to understand how it came about that, at the end of the Middle Ages, when such secular philosophers as Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza emancipated themselves from dogmatic theology, they still retained, in their role as metaphysicians, an absorbing predilection for theological problems, as witness Descartes’s *Meditations*, Leibniz’s *Theodicy* and *Discourse on Metaphysics*, and Spinoza’s *Ethics*.<sup>1</sup>

In the later Middle Ages, influenced by the conception of philosophy as a body of knowledge having the character of *epistémé*, which philosophy’s association with dogmatic theology intensified, philosophers, in dealing with the questions relegated to philosophical theology, tried to give their reasoning a demonstrative and rigorous appearance that it could not actually possess.

Thinking that they succeeded, they often went further and took over into philosophical theology matters with which reason, apart from faith, was even less competent to deal. They undid the good work of Aquinas by extending the bounds of philosophical theology to include much more than the few simple preambles to faith that he had placed on the philosophical side of the line that he drew to divide its domain from that of dogmatic theology.

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<sup>1</sup>When one examines the content, language, and style of argument of these works, there is good reason to say that they represent the end of the Middle Ages as well as the beginning of modern times.

This over expanded philosophical theology—or, in some cases, religious apologetics—not only set much of subsequent Scholastic philosophy off on a wild-goose chase, it also helped to get modern philosophy off to a bad start. I have in mind the work of the three great philosophers of the seventeenth century, to whom I have already referred: Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza.

They were brought up and educated in a tradition of metaphysics and theology that was a heritage from the later Middle Ages and the decadent Scholasticism of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Though two of them were Christians, none was a Christian philosopher in the sense of accepting the guidance of faith through the subordination of philosophy to dogmatic theology. On the contrary, they represent the revolt of philosophy from theology.

Readers must carefully examine Descartes's *Principles of Philosophy*, Spinoza's *Ethics*, and Leibniz's *Monadology* and *Discourse on Metaphysics* to see for themselves the style and manner of philosophizing, which I call system building. They will then, I hope, readily understand why I use that term in a wholly derogatory sense, especially if they bear in mind my central contention that philosophy, as a mode of inquiry, aims at knowledge in the form of testable *doxa*, not unquestionable *epistemé*. They will realize that system building defeats or violates the procedures proper to philosophy, especially its being conducted as a public enterprise in which common questions are faced, issues are joined, and disputes can be adjudicated.

The philosophical system which is so private and special that it came to be called Cartesian, or Spinozist, or Leibnizian assumes the character of a great painting or poem, an individual artistic achievement calling for rejection or acceptance as an inviolable whole. There are, of course, Platonic, Aristotelian, Augustinian, and Thomistic doctrines in philosophy, but there is no system of Platonic, Aristotelian, or Augustinian philosophy in any comparable sense of that term.

There is some accuracy in speaking of a Thomistic system, but this should always be understood as referring to the system of theology which Aquinas presented in his *Summa Theologica*, not to a system of philosophical thought, for none can be found in or extracted from his writings.

We have here one clue to what is wrong with system building in philosophy, as well as an explanation of how it arose. Since dog-

matic theology rests on the dogmas of religious faith, a system of dogmatic theology can be properly constructed by an orderly exposition and defense of these dogmas. It *is* the order and relationship of the dogmas, with which sacred theology begins, that give the dogmatic exposition of theology its systematic character. Clearly, I mean more here by “systematic” than thinking in an orderly and coherent way. I mean a monolithic structure, rising from a firm foundation in unchallengeable premises, such as dogmas are.

Even though they reacted against the *Summa Theologica* of Aquinas and other theological systems, the thinkers of the seventeenth century were greatly influenced by the model of system structure it offered. They were also influenced by another model of system structure—that of Euclid’s *Elements*—which was as inappropriate as the theological model for philosophers to try to imitate. Yet this is precisely what Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz tried to do, each in his own way.

Each laid down a few “unchallengeable” premises from which he thought he could erect, by the deductive elaboration of their consequences, the whole vast structure of his thought. Each proceeded in an ostensibly deductive manner to “demonstrate” conclusions that, for him, had the certitude and finality of *epistemé*.

Thus there came into being, for the first time in the history of philosophy, individual systems of thought, an event that caused drastic reactions and consequences in the centuries to follow. There are systems in mathematics, but there should be none in philosophy if philosophy is *doxa*, not *epistemé*.

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### THE VICISSITUDES OF PHILOSOPHY IN MODERN TIMES

In each of the two historical epochs that we have so far surveyed—antiquity and the Middle Ages—we have found both positive and negative features. I have called the latter the misfortunes or disorders that philosophy has suffered; and the former, the good starts or gains that it has made in understanding its tasks and acquiring sound procedures for accomplishing them.

The modern period, like the ancient and the mediaeval, has its positive as well as its negative features—its turns for the better as well as its misfortunes and disorders. In telling the story of philosophy in modern times, I am going to reverse the order and postpone a consideration of philosophy’s gains until I have described what I

regard as the four major misfortunes or disorders that it has suffered since the seventeenth century.

The first of these misfortunes occurred in the context of an otherwise sound critical reaction to the dogmatism and pretentiousness of the philosophical systems of the seventeenth century. The critical movement in philosophy, from Locke to Kant, looked askance at these systems and challenged their unwarranted claims to be able to demonstrate and to know with certitude. It questioned as well their competence to deal with matters (both theological and scientific) beyond the proper scope of philosophical inquiry.

In both of the respects just indicated, this critical reaction was sound, and it might have been wholly on the side of gain if it had insisted, positively, on the substitution of *doxa* for *epistemé* as the standard or grade of knowledge at which philosophy should aim. That by itself would have dealt a death blow to system building and provided an effective antitoxin against any future recurrence of the disease.

Unfortunately, the critical reaction to the systems of the seventeenth century took another course and resulted in two serious disorders. To explain the first of these, it is necessary to recall that, in the ancient and mediaeval worlds, metaphysics was called *philosophia prima*, or “first philosophy.” Let me now extend the meaning of “first philosophy” to include all first-order inquiries, not only speculative questions about that which is and happens in the world but also normative questions about what ought to be done and sought.

All such questions, as I pointed out earlier, take precedence over second-order questions of the sort concerned with how we can know the answers to first-order questions.<sup>2</sup> A sound approach to the examination of knowledge should acknowledge the existence of some knowledge to be examined. *Knowing what can be known* is prior to asking *how we know what we know*.

Using the word “epistemology” for the theory of knowledge—especially for inquiries concerning the “origin, certainty, and ex-

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<sup>2</sup>See Chapter 3, *supra*, for the distinction between first- and second-order questions. First-order questions occur in the first two dimensions of philosophy, where we find knowledge about reality, both descriptive and prescriptive. Second-order questions occur in the third and fourth dimensions of philosophy, where we find philosophical analysis and the understanding of ideas and subject matters. Recent linguistic and analytical philosophy is another type of second-order discipline.

tent” of our knowledge—I have two things to say about this part of the philosophical enterprise.

First, it should be reflexive; that is, it should examine the knowledge that we do have; it should be a knowing about our knowing.

Second, being reflexive, epistemology should be posterior to metaphysics, the philosophy of nature, ethics, and political theory—these and all other branches of first-order philosophical knowledge; in other words, our knowing what can be known should take precedence over our knowing about our knowing.

Both of these procedural points were violated in the critical movement that began with Locke and ran to Kant. Epistemology became “first philosophy,” taking precedence over all other branches of philosophical inquiry; and, with Kant, it became the basis for “prolegomena to any future metaphysic.” Epistemology more and more tended to swallow up the whole philosophical enterprise. It is this retreat from the known world and our knowledge of it to the world of the knower and his efforts to know which prepared the way for the later total retreat of philosophy (in our own century) to the plane of second-order questions, relinquishing entirely any claim to have a respectable method for carrying on first-order inquiries.

I think it is apt, and not too harsh, to call this first unfortunate result of the critical reaction to dogmatic systems “suicidal epistemologizing.” Epistemology, fashioned by philosophers as a scalpel to cut away the cancer of dogmatism, was turned into a dagger and plunged into philosophy’s vitals.

The second unfortunate result can, with equally good reason, be called “suicidal psychologizing.” Like the first, it is also a retreat from reality. Where the first is a retreat from the reality of the knowledge that we actually do have, the second is a retreat from the reality of the world to be known. Modern idealism begins with Kant. It is the worst of the modern errors in philosophy.

What I mean by “suicidal psychologizing” is sometimes less picturesquely described as “the way of ideas,” fathered by Descartes, but given its most unfortunate effects by the so-called British empiricists—Locke, Berkeley, and Hume—who made the psychologizing of common experience the whole of philosophy and substituted that for the use of common experience as a test of the soundness of philosophical theories or conclusions about the experienced world. The psychologizing of common experience deserves to be

called suicidal; for, in effect, it cuts away the very ground on which the philosopher stands. It makes experience subjective, rather than objective.

I need not dwell here on the far-reaching consequences of this fundamental substantive error—the subjectivism and the solipsism that resulted from proceeding in this way, together with all the skeptical excesses that it led to, and the epistemological puzzles and paradoxes that confronted those who tried to hold onto the most obvious features of our experience after they had been psychologized into myths or illusions.

Starting from Locke's fundamental error and carrying it to all its logical conclusions, later philosophers—first Berkeley and Hume, then the phenomenologists and logical empiricists of the twentieth century—reached results that they or others had enough common sense to recognize as absurd; but though many have deplored the resulting puzzles and paradoxes, no one seems to have recognized that the only remedy for the effects thus produced lies in removing the cause, by correcting Locke's original error, the error of treating ideas as *that which* we apprehend instead of *that by which*. It is this error that makes our common experience subjective rather than objective—introspectively observable, which it is not.

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