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The Baptism of Aristotle and Marx

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Of late many signs point to a militant reassertion of Catholic philosophy in American culture. Whether this movement is directly connected with the growing interest—and role—of the church in the political scene is difficult to say. But it throws a revealing light upon the character of the appeal which neo-Thomism makes to restless minds in search of a center. It also indicates something of the ideological strategy which devotees of the perennial philosophy may pursue in adapting themselves to the leftward swirling currents of American life. To Professor Mortimer J. Adler belongs the distinction of having dusted off the scholastic philosophy and in a series of provocative books, the latest of which is “*What Man Has Made of Man*,”* sent it into the arena of doctrinal controversy to do combat against modern heresies in education, politics, law, morals, psychology, art, and science. Basing himself upon the work of Jacques Maritain, whom he hails as the possible Aquinas of our age, he challenges all comers. Nor have his challenges been devoid of influence. His writings have probably irritated more people than they have convinced, but the argumentative skill of Professor Adler, together with his strategic educational position at the University of Chicago, whose president has urged the reform of higher education in accordance with the spirit of Adler’s thought, makes it necessary to give his position more critical attention than until now it has received.

Professor Adler’s work is best calculated to impress those practicing scientists and professional men who are untouched by

* *What Man Has Made of Man. A Study of the Consequences of Platonism and Positivism in Psychology.* By Mortimer J. Adler. Longmans, Green and Company. \$3.50.

any methodological sophistication. Avowing that they hold no philosophy of science or the naive one of just following the facts, it turns out that they are almost always talking bad philosophy. It is not difficult to shock them into a realization of its inadequacy. To this debating skill Adler adds an ability to translate the positions held by those whom he criticizes into scholastic terminology. And he very persuasively offers a fair field for the scientist to pursue his “surface investigations,” provided he leaves the real, the good, and the intelligible to the metaphysician and theologian. The scientist is given a promise of autonomy the exact lines of which are laid down in advance and for all time by the metaphysician, whose truths are absolute, universal, and necessary. On some subjects, such as the specific nature of God, freedom, and immortality, the metaphysician must bow to sacred theology—Catholic theology.

It is a strange but eloquent fact that although Mr. Adler has made short shrift, and with justice, of many vague and pretentious scientific ideologies, he has nowhere attempted to come to grips with the thought of critical empirical philosophers. He has only marginal comments to make on outstanding empirical philosophers who have long since abandoned the Aristotelianism he has so recently embraced, dragged its hidden assumptions into the light, and submitted them to devastating critiques. It is easy, for example, to convict scientists of discussing values without knowing that it is values they are discussing; or of handling problems which involve values as if they could be solved with the same techniques that are used in ascertaining simple matters of fact. It is an entirely different matter to meet the empirical theory of value on its own ground and to defend one’s own authoritarian spiritualism against the criticisms of naturalist philosophers. Since all matters of policy, whether of personal conduct or social action, involve assertions of value, any sharp divorce of the realm of values from scientific inquiry into their causes and consequences leads abruptly to obscurantism in morality and politics. Relieved of the checks and controls of scientific method, skilful apologists can foist upon the unwary a reactionary ideology under the banner of the sovereignty of philosophy.

In the present work, devoted to the errors of Platonism and positivism in psychology, Mr. Adler offers the outline of a comprehensive argument for the true position in almost every discipline ranging from ontology to psychoanalysis. He makes bold claims for philosophy. From handmaiden to the sciences it is raised to be their queen. It is represented as a body of knowledge whose content and validity are completely independent of the results of scientific inquiry. The latter is concerned with

phenomenal correlations; the former with essential causes. Since what is true for all of experience cannot be contravened by any science which reports on some special mode of experience, philosophy rules the sciences. Like the pope, philosophy is infallible but not impeccable—infallible about the relations of the sciences to one another and about the legitimacy of the “interpretations” of their findings, not impeccable about specific matters of fact. The fundamental principles and concepts of “general physics” as well as the principles of inference employed in all the special sciences are supplied by metaphysics. And psychology as the study of man’s knowledge of himself is a philosophical discipline. “Philosophy, answering the basic questions, necessarily subordinates as well as interprets and regulates scientific research.”

There is an ill-concealed arrogance in Mr. Adler’s references to contemporary science and modern philosophy which indicates that he has imbibed the dogmatism of Catholic philosophy but not its wisdom. Contemporary science, in so far as it is a quest for causes, illustrates little more to him than the fallacy of affirming the consequent, and modern philosophy “is an attention of the ancient and modern tradition, confounded by the repetition of old errors.” Yet there is a whole cluster of assumptions that are coolly begged in the face of a small library of critical literature which deals with them: for example, that there are self-evident, axiomatic truths of reason and immediate, absolutely known truths of perception; that a science whose conclusions are not entailed by these first truths can only give pseudo-knowledge or opinion; that statements which cannot possibly be tested by experience (for example, on Transcendentals, God, Substance, etc.) are significant; that adequate premises for a rational study of nature must express the essential natures of things. According to Adler man is essentially a rational animal. According to modern science neither man nor anything else is *essentially* this or that. “Essential” is a teleological term, delimiting a problem, a context, and a purposeful inquiry of some sort. Adler’s “essential” premises, forms, insights are disguised definitions. As definitions they are either adequate or inadequate to the purposes at hand. They are neither true nor false. The history of experimental science is to a large extent the history of its struggles to liberate itself from the Aristotelian conception of fixed essential kinds and natures. Although nominally Adler declares that science is independent of any philosophy, he insists that no science whose fundamental categories are not Aristotelian can be intelligible. One merely asks: intelligible to whom?

Mr. Adler, however, is not only an Aristotelian. Just as he is

compelled to perform major operations upon the logic of science to force it into an Aristotelian mold, he must also cut Aristotle to the pattern of Catholic purpose. This appears very clearly in his psychological discussion, particularly in his silent suppression of the revisions which Aquinas makes in Aristotle to reconcile him with the demands of religious faith. Adler almost always couples Aristotle and Aquinas together as if there were no important differences between the two either in metaphysics or psychology. Yet modern critical behaviorists could with as good, if not better, warrant construe their theory of mind out of the writings of Aristotle as Adler the Thomistic view of the soul. He writes *both* as an Aristotelian and a Thomist but blandly ignores the difficulty of showing how the Thomistic doctrines of Transcendentals, Analogy, Exemplarism, Creation, personal immortality, Providence—to mention only a few—can be squared with the principles of Aristotle's first philosophy. Platonism and positivism are castigated as twin enemies of the true philosophy of Aquinas. Yet he can hardly be unaware of the fact that in the interest of religious dogma, Aquinas was compelled to Platonize Aristotle, to make the existence of man and his soul, for example, depend upon God and not upon the essence of man, and therewith convert the logical distinction which Aristotle makes between essence and existence into a real separation. Like most people who revive an archaic doctrine for a contemporary purpose, Adler serves up an unhistorical version of Aristotle which few Aristotelian scholars who do not have to be mindful of the doctrinal necessities of sacred theology are likely to accept. Even the best among modern Thomists, like Gilson, are careful to point out that Aquinas, for all his indebtedness to Aristotle, was preeminently a Christian philosopher.

The baptism of Aristotle is an old story, and Adler is here following along a path which was beaten centuries before. Not so, however, with his attempt to baptize Marx or to turn Aquinas into a Marxist. How his frocked brethren will gasp when they read, "I have often been tempted to use the name 'dialectical materialism' for the traditional metaphysics of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas; for if the Marxists fully understood their own doctrine they would be hylomorphists or formal materialists." Now if Marxism represents any philosophical tendency it is that of scientific materialism; it has no place for traditional metaphysics, which presumably arrives at truths not confirmable by the sciences. Marxism also affirms that knowledge, or theory, makes a difference in history. This leads Adler to the non-sequitur that Marxists believe that "in human history reason is an independent cause," and that only the philosophy of Aristotle and Aquinas is

compatible with this belief. What Adler fails to realize is that, in the Marxist view, knowledge; can make a difference precisely because it is a form of behavior. It may not be completely dependent upon physico-chemical forces but dependent in some sense it must be if it is to have practical effect. The Marxist theories of mind, knowledge, and history are completely antithetical to Thomism. None the less he writes: "The Marxian can take the second [Thomist] position without altering his view of the shifting struggle of classes, without yielding in his justifiable moral condemnations of capitalism. In fact, he is strengthened in the latter if he become a Thomist." The context leaves unclear whether "the latter" refers to the whole of Marxism or only to its moral condemnation of capitalism. It is certainly a unique idea. One can be a good Marxist only if one is good Thomist. Adler will admit that a good Marxist must accept the class struggle, and its consequences—the Marxian theory of the state and revolution. What happens then to good Thomism? It looks as if Adler were already improving the Pope on points of doctrine. But what will the Archbishop of Chicago say?

It "can be simply shown," says Adler, that Marxian materialism is the formal materialism of Aquinas. And it is the veriest child's play for a virtuoso of Mr. Adler's order to show that the same is true for psychoanalysis. Addressing an audience of psychoanalysts, before whom these lectures were delivered, he claims that "psycho-analysts do not understand their places in this tradition, and as a result they do not understand their own doctrine." Freud like Marx is to be corrected not by scientific psychology, sociology, and history but by Thomist metaphysics. It is simply impossible to understand oneself unless one is a Thomist. But this last is only a necessary but not sufficient condition, for if Adler is right it seems as if most Thomists, too, have failed to understand themselves, particularly their close kinship to Marxism.

It would not be unfair to say that Mr. Adler fails to give even a remotely adequate account of the logic of scientific inquiry. The fruitfulness of science, or, better, opinion, appears miraculous on his definition of knowledge. The scientists, according to Adler, may explain the world in a descriptive sense, but they cannot understand it. Yet nowhere does he explain clearly the difference between explaining the world and understanding it. Further, it is obvious that Adler is not a genuine Aristotelian, for no Catholic philosopher can be. It is also obvious that he is not a Marxist except by the most arbitrary kind of definition. Nor a psychoanalyst of any known variety. But clearest of all is the fact that in making the Thomists clear to themselves his own Thomism

emerges as a wild heresy. It is doubtful whether it would ever have received the *nihil obstat*. I must confess to a constitutional sympathy for all varieties of heresy. But the Adlerian heresy, in blurring what should be carefully distinguished, strikes me as more dangerous than the clear-featured conservatism of orthodox Catholic philosophy. While other Catholic philosophers attack Marx, Dewey, and other naturalists to prevent inroads upon the flock of the faithful, Adler indicates the way in which the “sound” aspects of their doctrine can be absorbed in the Thomist tradition. His techniques make possible the claim that whatever is or will be true is already part of that tradition. In this way doctrines that cannot be refuted or suppressed can be corrupted by adoption. 📖 .

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