

of his image and any mention thereafter of this dictum of Aristotle. As the years passed by, however, I became aware of a sort of necessity in characterizing my professor's vigorous, virile thinking as truly sapiential. His strong grasping of principle coupled with constant rapid relating of it to consequent, by way of verification or prediction, has always impressed me as one of his most striking characteristics — and it was once my privilege (a student's dream) for four months of almost daily association to follow his penetrating gaze into the problem of the distinction between the mode of being and the mode of knowing.

Unhesitating in his forthright expression of the true and unflinching in his defense of it, he has always been, nevertheless, most humble in his searching, out of *wonder*, for that goal of doctrine and life which must be the limit to which his philosophy and theology ever tend. Few, to my mind, have been so successful in understanding and experiencing, so to speak, the fruitful correlation between the arts and sciences, on the one hand, and philosophy, on the other, between philosophy and theology, doctrine and life, private contemplation and public action. Whether meditating aloud on a dialectic that fructifies an otherwise static abstraction; or presenting his views to the Pope on the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary; or vigorously engaged in public discussion of anti-Semitism, non-denominational schools for non-denominational persons, or freedom of conscience for all (in the spirit of his *Tout homme est mon prochain*) — he manifests clarity, fortitude, and "concern" in the sapiential ordering of his thought, his counsel, and his action. He appears before us as an outstanding representative of the *philosophia perennis* and a living, solid refutation of the current charge that St. Thomas, the man and the idea, is irrelevant to our times.

With deep appreciation of the honor that is mine in representing, at this time, the American Catholic Philosophical Association, I now and in the name of this distinguished Association present the Cardinal Spellman-Aquinas Medal to an eminent philosopher and theologian, an indefatigable teacher, author, lecturer, and magnanimous sharer of his own great gifts of mind and heart — Professor Charles DeKoninck of Laval University, Québec.

JUVENAL LALOR, O.F.M.

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THREE SOURCES OF PHILOSOPHY

(*Medalist's Address*)

Discussing the fact that we first say *all* of three — of only two we say *both* — St. Thomas observes that we follow this way of speaking because conceptions that are commonly held by all proceed from an inclination of nature that is prior to any deliberate and constructive endeavour to learn. This constructive endeavour gives rise to proper conceptions — *propriae conceptiones uniuscuiusque* — and to a way of speaking appropriate to these.¹ Other examples of common conceptions would be those gathered under the word *one*, for instance; or *being*, or *same*. What we call movement, or place, or time are conceptions narrower in scope but still common. Ordinary language holds a vast number of such conceptions, and reveals distinctions not always easily accounted for. As Heisenberg observes, we do not speak of a piece of water, at least not in the same sense in which we say a piece of bread. Paul Valéry wrote: "Every man knows a prodigious amount of things, of which he does not know that he knows them (une quantité prodigieuse de choses qu'il ignore qu'il sait). To know all that we know? This search alone exhausts philosophy (éprouse la philosophie)." Valéry's remark may be an exaggeration, yet it is an instructive one.

In a well-known passage of his Gifford Lectures, Heisenberg declared that "... One of the most important features of the development and the analysis of modern physics is the experience that the concepts of ordinary language, vaguely defined as they are, seem to be more stable in the expression of knowledge than the precise terms of scientific language, derived as an idealization from only limited groups of phenomena. This is in fact not surprising, he adds, since the concepts of natural language are formed by the immediate connection with reality; they represent reality."

Proper conceptions can become hopelessly out of touch with the common ones which should engender them, and the gulf between the former and the latter can even become infinite, inasmuch as the

¹ *In I de Coelo*, lect. 2.

possibilities of defining something badly or inadequately are as countless as the ways of missing a target. Little wonder that there should be so many divergent positions among philosophers. They have an infinite margin for possible error allowing them to stray in the most unexpected directions, the margin called "non-being" in Plato's Sophist. In fact some people believe that the only right definition is the sum of the wrong ones . . . And I take as examples the distance between motion, infinity, place and time as we first know and name them on the one hand, and on the other, the definitions we compose to bring home to us more distinctly what these things are. Whereas the *definiendum* is a common conception, the definition, expressing more distinctly what the thing is, is a proper conception whose value must depend upon what is already vaguely known. (We here prescind from instances of definitions that posit the *definitum* — as in mathematics, where they are called creative.)

Conceptions are called common not only because they are commonly held by all but also because of an intrinsic commonness that explains why they are proportionally vague or confused. The things we are most certain of, whether expressed by word or proposition, are less exactly known in direct proportion to our greater and greater certitude. Aristotle and his followers are not the only ones to state this plainly; even Bertrand Russell has done so in *My Philosophical Development*: "It seems to me that philosophical investigation, as far as I have experience of it, starts from that curious and unsatisfactory state of mind in which one feels complete certainty without being able to say what one is certain of." He had just said that "analysis gives new knowledge without destroying any of the previously existing knowledge." In an earlier work (*Human Knowledge*) he observed that "The Astronomer's sun, for instance, is very different from what we see, but it must have a definition derived from the ostensive definition of the word 'sun' which we learnt in childhood . . . The question of interpretation has been unduly neglected. So long as we remain in the region of mathematical formulae, everything appears precise, but when we seek to interpret them it turns out that the precision is partly illusory. Until this matter has been cleared up, we cannot tell with any exactitude what any given science is asserting."

As was suggested above, there is a direct proportion between the

inescapable certitude of the things most commonly yet most vaguely known and the difficulty of describing or defining them. Yet, if we did not have such preexistent knowledge, we would ask no question about anything, nor would we communicate with one another except by sniffs and grunts.

The reason for the difficulty of reflection upon our common conceptions is that, while most known to us, they are least knowable in themselves, just as what is most knowable in itself is least knowable as to us — except in mathematics. For instance, as St. Thomas explains, "this name *act*, which is posited to signify actuality and completeness, namely *form*, and the like, such as the *act* of any sort of operation whatever, is derived, as to the origin of the term, chiefly from motion. Since words are signs of intelligible conceptions, we first impose names upon the things we first know, even though these be posterior in the order of nature. Now among all other acts, the one that is most known and apparent to us is motion, as known to us sensibly. Hence it is upon this act that the name *act* was first imposed, and from motion it was extended to other things."²

As we move away from first and common conceptions and from such earlier meanings of words, we become more engaged, as we should, in proper conceptions and expressions appropriate to them. But the crucial point is that our proper conceptions, no matter how good and true, should never become divorced from, and then substitute for, the common ones. As Whitehead put it: "This is a permanent difficulty of philosophic discussion; namely, that words must be stretched beyond their common meanings in the marketplace. But notwithstanding this difficulty, philosophy must found itself upon the presuppositions and the interpretations of ordinary life. In our first approach to philosophy, learning should be banished. We should appeal to the simple-minded notions issuing from ordinary civilized social relations." Abstraction is of course necessary, but, as Whitehead adds, "The abstraction, inherent in the development of language, has its dangers. It leads away from the realities of the immediate world. Apart from a balanced emphasis, it ends in the triviality of quick-witted people." Often enough people in philosophy or science may be said to suffer from a sophisticated type of schizophrenia in that the world they eat and

² In *II Meta*, lect. 3.

sneezes in has little or nothing to do with the one in which they think — or think they think. A first step toward finding the way out is to become aware of this condition.

Yet it is precisely our common conceptions that are sometimes called trivial, on the foolish assumption that what all in fact agree upon can be of no importance and must be irrelevant to the high pursuits of philosophy. It is true that if we shut ourselves rigidly within notions or propositions "quae communiter cadunt in conceptione cuiuslibet intellectus" we shall never begin to philosophize. But philosophy nevertheless depends upon knowledge that is prior to and independent of philosophy. Should we attempt to cut ourselves loose from the common conceptions, drifting away from our moorings, we shall soon find ourselves trapped in verbiage and, in the inescapable terms of common conceptions, forever arguing against their relevance — much as the person holding that all statements are false, or that all is contingent, cannot escape the implication that this statement must likewise be false, or that not all things are contingent, since at least the statement that *all things are contingent* is held to be necessary by the one who makes it.

The distinction between common and proper conceptions allows us to define what a philosophical 'system' is and, accordingly, how to construct one. As Spinoza and Hegel understood it, a philosophical system is one that starts from proper conceptions as if they could be substituted for common ones. This approach has the apparent advantage of a freedom to which we may never lay claim so long as we must insist on the priority of common conceptions. But, after committing ourselves to the wrong sort of beginning we can indulge in endless acrobatics within our heads, regardless of awkward fact. Definitions now become arbitrary. We choose our definitions and follow through by assuming the reality of the *definita* we have posited by defining. Now, once something second is taken as first, we can fabricate as many philosophical systems as we please. If, for instance, we substituted Aristotle's definition of motion for what the definition defines and then forgot all about the *definiendum*, we would at once have materials for a system. Or if we substituted time, as the physicist must define it, for the time seized by common conception there would be no time left: no past, no present, no future, as Hermann Weyl put it. Bergson's life long protest was against this particular piece of legerdemain.

In other words, when a name that stands for a common conception is thereafter used for its elaborated definition as if the definition henceforth became its first and sole meaning, we are on the way to a system, and the first and final term of resolution would be to that name, divorced from what we really know before inquiry. We would in fact have as many irreducible systems as there are languages, and within each language there would be as many systems as there are diverse meanings of the words referred to in that way. Yvon Belaval calls this procedure a "mécanisme de compensation qui concrétise dans le verbe ce qui se déconsiste dans le sens."

All this goes very well in symbolic logic, where we can have as many consistent systems as we please — *ad infinitum*. Similarly, there are many relatively consistent philosophies, but they are reached only at the expense of refining common conceptions out of existence. However, not even the most systematic system in philosophy can be entirely consistent. Hegel fell short of complete consistency. One of the chief difficulties of his system is our assumption that it ought to be consistent. If he had succeeded he would have had no system.

We all know how Descartes felt about Aristotle's definitions of motion, place and time. This was perhaps not entirely his fault. The pseudo-scholastics of his generation had already given proper conceptions the status of common ones. He was not the first to confuse certitude and clarity — though he may have been the first explicitly to assert that motion, place and time are the clearest and most distinct ideas in the world, and that it is silly to try and find something more known by which to define them. In expression at least, this was a radical new departure. Earlier philosophers, with no exceptions I know of, had all found motion so very obscure that some denied its reality, while others argued that there can be no *épistémè* of things for the very reason that they are in motion. We are in fact aware with complete certitude that there is such a thing as motion, but what motion is remains accordingly obscure; and even when defined and thus known more distinctly, to grasp what it is remains difficult. All we know in the end is that motion is possible because there *is* motion, and here again we are back to our common conception.

With respect to Descartes, the point is that to declare that mo-

tion is the clearest thing in the world is to establish a "propria conceptio" by means of nothing better than a proportionate "modus loquendi" — and to declare what has thus been posited to be absolutely first. No wonder that this kind of clarity would eventually lead to the priority of will even with respect to the truth of what things are.

Meanwhile, we maintain the common conceptions as the first inescapable source of philosophy for the reason that "in huiusmodi principiis stat omnium demonstrationum resolutio."³ The reason we must begin and end with them lies in the very nature of our intellects inasmuch as understanding, in us, is posterior to and dependent upon the thing understood. If we were separated substances — heaven forbid! — things other than ourselves would be present in our minds before being present to us in their own reality. It would be directly from God that we would receive our knowledge of them, and yet we would know them as they are.⁴ Now the actual condition of things for us entails that the things we first know are not in themselves actually intelligible, but only potentially so, and in themselves never do become actually intelligible, but only in our own minds. "Intelligibile in actu est intellectus in actu". So here is another source that is prior to philosophy, namely, our own minds inasmuch as they furnish actual intelligibility, however tenuous, to whatever it is that we know, allowing us to move on to what is more intelligible in itself, by a deliberate progress from common to proper conceptions and to whatever can be derived from these. Notice, however, that when we achieve some knowledge of the divine, it will be by climbing from effect to cause, and then, anything we attain will be achieved by way of negations. And this can be a perilous ascent, for if we have neglected our common conceptions, and the proper conceptions in which we try to seize these more distinctly, we may well be at a loss to find something to negate. Some sort of being, real in some sense, must be laid hold of, if we are ever truly to declare that this is *not* that. To destroy metaphysics as *theologia* is all too easy.

Perhaps system building in philosophy is a protest against the priority of things as against our knowledge of them — against the fact that our minds must grope in *umbra intelligentiae*. We may

well be by nature inclined to build a wall between our proper conceptions and the common ones. The peculiar fashion in which we raise the problem of science and philosophy is one indication of this divided mind. Perhaps our difficulty is traceable to unwittingly wrong proper conceptions of what science and what philosophy are.

As regards philosophy, the human condition is highly embarrassing. Appetite has so much more to do with our thinking than reason that it is a wonder that any philosophical doctrines can be true and perennial. Perennial, not merely because old, but because rooted as they are in common conceptions they are timeless.

That a man should spend most of his life in error, and only here and there, after a long time and much endeavour, catch a glimpse of the truths philosophy is after, is only natural; but it is just as natural that the history of philosophy should be chiefly a history of errors. And I protest that this attitude towards philosophy is not pessimistic — no more than the declaration *oportet haereres esse* is a despairing prophesy. Not that we are to invite error or to create disagreement. They will arise of themselves.

Evil and error have more of an existential impact than good and truth, just as pain, or suffering, can dull out all other awareness. A true philosophical temperament is not thrown into panic by error, but seizes upon it as an occasion to get nearer the truth. As Ortega y Gasset pointed out early in this century, the desire to know is one thing, fear of error is another. When fear takes precedence, philosophy reduces to criterologies, epistemologies and gnosologies — prolegomena to nothing. To begin in fear of error is to end in doubt. Surely it is significant that the Philosopher raises, explains, and deals with the *universalis dubitatio de veritate* only after a great deal of training and knowledge has been achieved.

If there were no errors about that foreboded disastrous consequences the philosopher would be a very sleepy man. The arrows of contradiction are something of which we stand in need. As Montaigne said: "L'assuëfaction endort la vue de notre jugement." And he was describing the philosophical temperament when he said: "Les contradictions donc des jugements ne m'offensent ni m'altèrent; elles m'éveillent seulement et m'exercent."⁵ So, one

³ In Boethii de Hebdomadibus, lect. 1.

⁴ QQ. Disputatae de Potentia, IV, 2, 8m.

⁵ Cf. St. Thomas, In III Metu., lect. 1: "... Ita necesse est eum, qui debet audire philosophiam, melius se habere in iudicando si audierit omnes rationes quasi adversariorum dubitantium."

person can be helped by another to reach the truth "in quantum priores errantes circa veritatem, posterioribus exercitii occasionem dederunt, ut diligenti discussione habita, veritate limpidius apparet." ⁶

And so our *pietas* must extend, not only to those who have directly taught us the truth, but also to those who help us by missing the target. We must be docile enough to learn even from what is false, and to derive instruction from the foolish. As Cato said, "the wise have more to learn from the foolish than the foolish from the wise."

I have just used the word *pietas* (the English "piety" has been submerged by the vague generality of love) which Cicero defined "per quam sanguine iunctis, patriaeque benevolis officium et diligens tribuitur cultus." *Pietas* so understood refers primarily to the authors of our physical life. But the highest kind of life is the life of understanding. No one can deem himself able single-handed to acquire knowledge of those things that in themselves are most worthy of being known. If there is one thing that the history of philosophy reveals, it is that the philosophers who have contributed most of all to the truth were also the most docile toward their predecessors — as to masters and teachers from whom they drew a life more perfect, though less basic, than the one obtained from the parents who begot them according to the flesh. We owe a greater duty of *pietas* to our parents as teachers, than to our parents as sources of our natural life. And in this regard, our parents share more deeply in the fatherhood of God by educating than by begetting.⁷ Fatherhood according to the flesh is a case of what is first in the order of learning and naming, but it is last *secundum ordinem rerum*.

Now, for his education, man is far more dependent on his fellows than is any other animal. To ignore this is an act of impiety. Philosophy is a fantastically difficult enterprise. If the history of philosophy holds any lesson for us, it is that however little of it we have learned, we should be grateful to those who helped us along. Descartes may have been a good man, indeed a good Christian, but in philosophy he lacked *pietas*, just as he lacked true reverence toward the things of nature. He did not realize that

⁶ *In II Meta*, lect. 1.

⁷ Cf. St. Thomas, *In ad Ephesios* 3, lect. 5.

in fact he was very much dependent upon his forbears, as M. Gilson has shown once and for all.

The attitude of St. Thomas toward his teachers, especially toward the ancient and long-dead ones, is most praiseworthy. His reverence in this regard is unequalled. As the result of an immense docility (which is a capacity for active response) he became a *Magister* par excellence. The Sorbonne professor who declared, some decades ago (and of whom we are not likely to hear again), that St. Thomas's I.Q. never rose higher than that of a little boy, was in fact paying the Angelic Doctor a great compliment if his little boy may be taken as the equal of St. Exupéry's *Petit Prince*. "Les grandes personnes ne comprennent jamais rien toutes seules, et c'est fatigant, pour les enfants, de toujours et toujours leur donner des explications."

In St. Thomas we are constantly aware of a docility toward things, toward the shortcomings of his own mind, and toward that other source of philosophy, the great spirits who already know, and even those men who have shown us what not to do. To be sure, the mere appeal to authority in philosophy is an "argumentum debilissimum". And, "studium philosophiae non est ad hoc ut sciatur quid homines senserint, sed quomodo se habeat rei veritas." This observation of St. Thomas reveals how thoroughly he was convinced that "amicus Aristoteles, sed magis amica veritas." Any other attitude would be impious toward the one who placed truth above Plato. The poet may love his poems in the way a father loves his son. But an attachment of this sort to one's philosophy will mean death to one's power of thinking.

Things must come first as they do, and never shall they become quite our own, inasmuch as they are forever more than we know of. Let me here use St. Thomas's commentary on our Lord's words "Qui loquitur a seipso, mendacium loquitur." To this man, St. Thomas opposes the one who does not speak from himself, but who tries to tell what is true. For, all knowledge of truth, he explains, is from another: either by way of discipline, as from a master; or by way of revelation, as from God; or by way of discovery, as from things themselves. In none of these ways does a man's knowledge come from the man himself. Whoever, with the exception of God, speaks *ex propriis, mendacium loquitur*. God alone, speaking *ex propriis*, tells the truth. Whereas man, so

speaking, is a liar.⁸ And the Angelic Doctor quotes Chrysostomus: "the one who desires to teach his own doctrine, desires to do this for no other reason than his own vainglory."

While firmly believing all this to be true, one must be equally ready to accept that others, from the start, believe it all wrong. This does not mean that, in the face of contradiction, one must invariably reply *licet*, 'perhaps', the adverb of senility. Still, where firm conviction is found, there should also be found that sense of humour without which there can be no wisdom.

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⁸ St. Thomas, *In Joannem* 7, lect. 1; 8, lect. 6.

THE HISTORY OF SCIENCE AND THE ENTERPRISE OF PHILOSOPHY: A PRELUDE TO PARTNERSHIP

1. THE HISTORY OF SCIENCE

Dot the midpoint of a sheet of foolscap and label it *C*, to mark the fixed center of the closed spherical universe of ancient astronomy. Around *C* describe a circle of diameter, *d*. Shade the enclosed area and print therein *E* for earth, one of the four basic elements in its pure state and *natural habitant*. About the same *C* construct a second circle with 2 *d* diameter. Hatch the newly enclosed area and inscribe therein *W* for water, second of the four primordial elements in its undiluted state and *commutual home*. Around the same *C* draw a third circle with 3 *d* diameter. Cross-hatch the newly enclosed region and therein write *A* for air, third of the primitive elements and likewise in its unpolluted state and *native cosmic roost*. In the same way draft a fourth concentric circle with 4 *d* diameter. Scatter curlicues throughout the such enclosed area and therein print *F* for fire, fourth and last of the basic elements in its pure state and *native location*.

This design is an authentic blueprint of the conventional world of ancient terrestrial physics in its theoretically *ideal* static condition of cosmic rest. For all clods of earth, as heaviest element, *belong* by natural destiny in a dense and homogeneous cluster about *C* in *E*. And all drops of water, as lighter than *E* but heavier than air, *belong* in a continuous 3-dimensional blanket of uniform thickness in *W* around *E*. And all gusts of air, as lighter than *W* but heavier than fire, *belong* in a continuous 3-dimensional envelope of uniform thickness in *A* around *W*. And all flames of fire, as absolutely light, *belong* in a continuous 3-dimensional cover of uniform thickness in *F* around *A*.

But the *real* dynamic state of our world is vastly different. Large land masses protrude above ocean depths whence also air bubbles come. Combustible wood contains both air and fire and remnants of earth in ashes. And air escapes from boiling water. The fact is that the four elements are randomly mixed into a heterogeneous amalgam.

Three Sources of Philosophy
(translations of French and Latin phrases)

- Pg. 13 – *propriae conceptiones uniuscujusque* – proper conceptions/notions of each thing.
- Pg. 14 – *definiendum* – the thing to be defined.
- Pg. 14 – *definitum* – the thing that has been defined.
- Pg. 16 – *quae communiter cadunt in conceptione cujuslibet intellectus* – which commonly fall into the understanding of every intellect.
- Pg. 16. – *definita* – the things which have been defined.
- Pg. 17 – *mécanisme de compensation qui concrétise dans le verbe ce qui se déconsiste dans le sens* – technique of compensation which concretizes in the word that which is unclear/vague in the meaning.
- Pg. 17 – *ad infinitum* – without limit.
- Pg. 17 – *epistèmè* – scientific knowledge.
- Pg. 18 – *propria conceptio* – proper conception.
- Pg. 18 – *modus loquendi* – way of speaking.
- Pg. 18 – *in hujusmodi principiis stat omnium demonstrationum resolutio* – the resolution of every demonstration takes its stand/terminates in these sorts of principles.
- Pg. 18 – *intelligibile in actu est intellectus in actu* – the intelligible in act is the intellect/understanding in act.
- Pg. 18 – *theologia* – theology.
- Pg. 18 – *in umbra intelligentiae* – in the shadow of intelligence.
- Pg. 19 – *oportet haereses esse* – heresies must exist.
- Pg. 19 – *universalis dubitatio de veritate* – the universal doubt concerning truth.
- Pg. 19 – *L'assuèfaction endort la vue de notre jugement* – custom puts to sleep the vision of our judgement.
- Pg. 19 – *Les contradictions donc des jugements ne m'offensent ni m'altèrent; elles m'éveillent seulement et m'exercent* – Contradictions between judgements, therefore, neither offend me nor upset me; they only animate me and challenge me.
- Pg. 20 – *in quantum priores errantes circa veritatem, posterioribus exercitii occasionem dederunt, ut diligenti discussione habita, veritate limpidius appareret* – insofar as those who come before [and] err regarding the truth have given to those who come after [them] an occasion for exercise, so that by diligent discussion the truth may appear more clearly.
- Pg. 20 – *per quam sanguine junctis, patriaeque benevolis officium et diligens tribuitur cultus* – [piety is that] through which service and loving honor is rendered to kinsmen and to those benevolent to the fatherland.
- Pg. 20 – *secundum ordinem rerum* – according to the order of things.
- Pg. 21 – *Les grandes personnes ne comprennent jamais rien toutes seules, et c'est fatigant, pour les enfants, de toujours et toujours leur donner des explications* – Adults never understand anything at all on their own and it is tiring, for the children, always and always to give them the explanations/answers.
- Pg. 21 – *argumentum debilissimum* – weakest argument.
- Pg. 21 – *studium philosophiae non est ad hoc ut sciatur quid homines senserint, sed quomodo se habeat rei veritas* – the study of philosophy is not ordered to knowing what men may have thought, but rather to knowing the truth about things.
- Pg. 21 – *amicus Aristoteles, sed magis amica veritas* – Aristotle is a friend, but the truth is more of a friend.
- Pg. 21 – *Qui loquitur a seipso, mendacium loquitur* – He who speaks from himself, speaks a lie.
- Pg. 21 – *ex propriis, mendacium loquitur* – [Whoever, with the exception of God, speaks] on his own/from those things proper to himself, speaks a lie.
- Pg. 21 – *ex propriis* – [God alone, speaking] on His own/from those things proper to Him [tells the truth].