Charles De Koninck: A Philosopher of Order

by Ralph M. McInerny

" Car j'espère connaître suffisament saint Thomas pour ne rester toujours qu'un disciple qui croit en son maître."
Le problème de l'indéterminisme, 1935

CHARLES DE KONINCK died in Rome on February 13, 1965, at the age of fifty-eight. The conciliar theologian of His Eminence, Maurice Cardinal Roy, De Koninck was in the Holy City attending meetings of the subcommittee on birth control of which he was a member. Some of his contributions to the work of that committee, papers in which he argued that no traditional moral principles would be violated by the use of the " pill," have been published, and doubtless others will be in the future. Thus, at the time of his death, as during most of his professional career, he was engaged in controversy. He loved controversy but not, I think, for its own sake, although he exhibited a zest for intellectual battle; for him, problems were to be solved, and in his lifetime he proposed many solutions to pressing contemporary issues. In recent years he spoke of the adverb of senility, " perhaps," and he was more flexible than he had been in his youth and middle career; but to the end he spoke with authority, and this was something which endeared him to those who found his arguments cogent and provoked those who did not. And from first to last, the measure of his thought was the doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas.

A native of Belgium, a citizen of Canada, he died in the Columbus Hotel in Rome. He was a Third Order Dominican, a member of the Royal Society of Canada, of the Roman

Academy of Saint Thomas, Commander of the Order of Saint Gregory, and, in 1964, the recipient of the Cardinal Spellman Aquinas Medal given by our own American Catholic Philosophical Association of which he was a longtime member. He joined the *Faculté de Philosophie* of Laval in 1934, coming from Louvain where he had received the Ph. D. He held the S. T. D. from Laval. He was Dean of the *Faculté de Philosophie* from 1939 to 1956 and was reappointed to that post last June. From 1957 to 1963 he spent the Fall semester at Notre Dame. He is survived by his wife, Zoé, eleven children and six grandchildren. May he rest in peace.

The influence of De Koninck on Catholic philosophers in North America, while real and widespread, is difficult to assess. For American students who went there, he was the soul of the *Faculté de Philosophie* at Laval. They returned from their years in Quebec to institutions scattered throughout this country profoundly influenced by De Koninck's courses. We who studied under him have not become what he wished us to be, certainly not in very large measure. But perhaps this melancholy situation is not unique. It may even be that the great, despite themselves, intimidate their students by providing too brilliant an example so that the task becomes the almost hopeless one of catching up rather than that of going beyond.

Those of us who were his friends will of course remember De Koninck in a special and finally incommunicable way. His courses have all been given now; they persist, if at all, only in mimeographed notes of varying value. It is his published work that is, although with unequal ease, available to all. That work enables me to forego the sad if attractive task of writing a personal memorial in favor of the joyful one of indicating at least in a skeletal way the main lines of De Koninck's intellectual effort.[1]

[1] What follows is a close adaptation of "Un philosophe de l'ordre," an

About thirty years ago Charles De Koninck wrote that as a philosopher he had but one desire, to be a faithful disciple of St. Thomas Aquinas. Consequently, any assessment of his efforts must be made in terms of his fidelity to that master who is his—and ours—not by caprice or whimsy but by a providential design made manifest in the repeated urgings of the Popes. It is not our intention here to juxtapose selected passages from the writings of De Koninck and St. Thomas: this would be altogether too material a test of fidelity, although De Koninck was fond of saying that what have been regarded as his most revolutionary statements are almost literal repetitions of Aquinas. Our plan is at once more modest and more formal, for we intend to cast an eye over the sweep of De Koninck's writings from the point of view of the decisive characteristic of wisdom, presuming that the effect of fidelity to St. Thomas should be nothing less than the acquisition of a sapiential outlook.

Sapientis est ordinare.

Il appartient au sage d'ordonner, dit saint Thomas, 'Parce que la sagesse est la plus haute perfection de la raison, dont c'est le propre de connaître l'ordre.' Parce que l'ordre comporte principe et principe, relation, seule l'intelligence peut atteindre l'ordre sous la raison même d'ordre.[2]

Wisdom is had not by knowledge of just any order, but preeminently by knowledge of all things in their reference to an absolutely first principle. The work of De Koninck from the very beginning exhibited a fundamental concern with order, with particular orders, of course, but most importantly with that order whose principle is first without qualification.

appreciation I wrote for the September-October, 1962 issue of the French journal *Itinéraires* which was devoted to De Koninck. Thomas De Koninck told me that his father had read, and concurred with, my exegesis of his writings. That same issue contains a De Koninck bibliography through 1961 compiled by Fr. Armand Gagné.

[2] *Ego Sapientia. La sagesse qui est Marie* (Quebec, 1943), p. 23.

In his first book, *Le cosmos* (1936), De Koninck touched on many of the themes which were always to occupy him. Characteristically, the book is concerned with the material world as cosmos, as a unity of order. This cosmos is considered from a scientific, a philosophical, and finally from a theological point of view; the plan and execution of the work exhibit the author's breadth of interest as well as competence at the very outset of his career. Moreover, the division of the book suggests immediately the problem with which De Koninck's name is most frequently associated on the North American continent, the relation between philosophy of nature and experimental science. We shall concern ourselves first of all with De Koninck's solution to this problem; as we shall see, what he has to say about the philosophy of nature comes to be central to any present day attempt to justify the traditional philosophy.

The advance of the positive sciences and of the technique which follows in their wake is one of the most striking facts of modern culture. As we know, this advance has been made against the background of a repudiation of ancient and medieval science of nature; moreover, it has been paralleled by a suite of philosophical systems which call into question the traditional notion of science and, by way of consequence, all the hard-won truths which were brought together, augmented, and ordered so incomparably by that Angelic Doctor whose teaching the Church has made her own. Even the philosopher uninfluenced by the magisterium must recognize in this situation a difficulty of the first magnitude, if only because he finds his field of inquiry inexorably diminishing before the advance of science. Perhaps it is not too great a simplification to say that, faced with the onslaught of science, philosophy appears to have but two choices open to it: to become mere philosophy of science, a reflection on the course of the experimental sciences, or, on the other hand, to retreat into mysticism. Neither of these avenues is open to the philosopher who sets out to be a disciple of St. Thomas.

At the time De Koninck began to write there were discernible two Thomistic interpretations of the relationship between philosophy and science. What has come to be called the Louvain position maintained that philosophy is identical with metaphysics and that the realm of nature must be ceded to the experimental scientist. Insofar as the philosopher spoke of the natural world, what he had to say was metaphysics and was not in any way a natural science. In correction of this view, Jacques Maritain held that there is indeed a philosophy of nature distinct both from metaphysics and from experimental or, as he preferred to put it, empiriological science. Philosophy and science were both concerned with nature but in autonomous fashions: they were in fact formally distinct sciences of nature. Subsequently, Maritain held that the philosophy of nature follows on the empiriological sciences and must be rethought with each significant advance on the part of the sciences. If natural being is *ens sensible,* Maritain observed, philosophy of nature concentrates on *ens* and is ontological, whereas the sciences concentrate on *sensible,* on the contingent and fluid, and never achieve the status of science in the Aristotelian sense.

In *Le cosmos,* De Koninck indicated that he accepted Maritain's view on this matter. He speaks of a radical separation of science and philosophy (p. 31), and says the latter is ontological. The articles entitled " Réflexions sur le problème de l'indéterminisme " make the agreement explicit.

Les conséquences de la composition hylémorphique sont ainsi le fondement objectif de la distinction entre les sciences expérimentales et les disciplines. La philosophie de la nature étant scientia certa per causas, ne peut atteindre que ce qui est essentiel à la nature et nécessaire, telle la composition hylémorphique des substances naturelles, la contingence qu'entraine cette composition, la nécessité de l'evolution, la nécessité de l'humanité comme fin dernière de toute cette ascension du monde, etc. Bref, tout ce qu'on peut établir avec rigueur sur ce que M. Maritain appelle des *faits philosophiques.* Par contre, la science expérimentale, dans la mesure où elle ne se borne pas à de purs truismes et à des

tautologies, dans la mesure où elle est science explicative, ne peut nous donner des choses qu'une connaissance probable.[3]

Not too much of what is here said about philosophy of nature and experimental science really changes when De Koninck achieves his own more satisfactory position, as the significance attached to the differences.

In his first writings, De Koninck seems not to have concerned himself explicitly with the relation between philosophy of nature and science; rather he simply accepted a position which contains much merit. Within a surprisingly short time his own view appears fully developed, the fruit of his lectures on philosophy of nature and scientific methodology at Laval. "Les sciences expérimentales sont-elles distinctes de la philosophie de la nature?" appeared in the Canadian review *Culture* in 1941 (pp. 456-476). The following remark suggests what has ever since been the view of De Koninck.

La philosophie de la nature désire savoir ce que sont les choses naturelles, non pas d'une manière confuse, mais dans leur concrétion propre. L'unité de cette fin ne sera pas rompue par la diversité des moyens à employer, c'est au contraire une même fin que les commande, pourvu qu'ils permettent de mieux connaître. Même l'usage des mathématiques dans lequel le physicien se subalterne au mathématicien afin de connaître les choses dans leur aspect quantitatif et au moyen de cet aspect qui se présente d'abord dans les sensibles communs—nombre, grandeur, figure, mouvement, temps, situs, lieu, lesquels se ramenent tous à la quantité—ne divise radicalement la doctrine naturelle (p. 469).

This viewpoint, while well established in the 1941 article, required a good deal of further development and, in the midst of myriad other interests, writings and obligations, De Koninck attempted to provide the necessary nuances and additions; particularly in the last few years, he published a number of studies on this subject which are of fundamental importance.[4] We must

[3] *Révue thomiste*, XXI (1937), 406.

[4] See *Natural Science as Philosophy* (Quebec, 1959); *The Hollow Universe* (New York, 1961); "The Unity and Diversity of Natural Science,"

try to sketch the essential doctrine as it emerges from these writings appearing over a span of some twenty years.

In what way is it possible to maintain that philosophy of nature and experimental science are formally distinct? As soon as De Koninck posed this question, he became convinced that the alleged formal distinction was an impossiblity. This becomes clear when we ask ourselves just what it is that is divisive of sciences. The doctrine of St. Thomas is clear and unassailable: given the necessity required by science and the immateriality of the intellect, the subject of any science is constituted by being removed, separated, abstracted from motion and matter. The degree of removal from matter will be revealed in the definitions of a science, and significant differences in modes of defining with respect to matter will be productive of formally different sciences.

On this view, there is a formal difference between natural science, mathematics, and metaphysics, but it is difficult to see how one can speak of a formal distinction within the area of natural science. Obviously one must recognize different methods in this area.

> Different sciences have different subjects and different methods, no doubt. However, even when the formal subject (taken from the mode of defining) is the same, one and the same science can still use different methods. Not only each science, but each branch of a single science may stand in need of diverse methods. Physics (in Aristotle's sense) and psychology are parts of one and the same science: but they use quite different methods . . . the first being mainly based upon external experience, the latter upon the internal experience of being alive. And when, in this same science of physics, we apply mathematics to nature,

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in *The Philosophy of Physics*, ed. V. Smith (New York, 1961). The following articles from *Laval théologique et philosophique* must also be cited: "La dialectique des limites comme critique de la raison," I (1945), 177-185; "Concept, Process and Reality," II (1946), 141-146: "Introduction à l'étude de l'âme,' III (1947), 9-65; "Random Reflections on Science and Calculation," XII (1956), 84-119; "Abstraction from Matter, I," XIII (1957), 133-136; "Abstraction from Matter, II," XVI (1960), 53-69.

the method again becomes widely different: for we will now have to do with movement *qua measurable* (*In Boethium de Trin.*, q. 5, a. 3, ad. 5). But none of this has anything to do with a distinction between philosophy and science. . . . The various departments of knowledge about nature all arise from wonder and aim to dispel ignorance, while on the other hand their mode of defining is the same, namely *cum materia sensibili*.[5]

Insofar as the definitions of experimental science can be shown to depend upon sensible matter, it will be clear that despite dramatic methodological differences we are faced with a continuation of the science begun in the *Physics* of Aristotle.

It will not be possible here to discuss in any detail the use De Koninck made of the notions of subalternation and dialectic to elucidate the nature of experimental science. Subalternation provides a way of explaining the use of mathematics to cast light on the natural world; dialectics as a method which does not attain the term of certitude seems applicable to experimental sciences. In his recent efforts, De Koninck made it perfectly clear that he does not maintain that mathematical physics today is pretty much the same sort of thing as ancient optics or harmonics. The role of symbolic construction in modern science has received much attention, particularly in *The Hollow Universe,* and De Koninck has examined symbols in their relation to names and the mode of defining proper to natural science.

In short, his is a highly nuanced position, and if it is true to say that what he holds is that the experimental sciences are the prolongation of what is begun in the *Physics,* it is also true that he has never considered this unity in a simplistic manner. Nor does he want to suggest that the common view that philosophy and science are quite different is utterly without grounds; this judgment is a by product of the specialization inevitable because of the limitations of the single human intellect. But he is eloquent on the practical consequences of erecting a contingent and

[5] *Natural Science as Philosophy,* pp. 7-8.

de facto division of labor into a theoretical difference. It is just here that the order he insists on within natural doctrine takes on a significance which is not simply speculative.

The cultural problem attached to the advance of science follows on our confusion as to how science relates to the rest of life (Cf. C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures*). De Koninck's teaching on the continuity between philosophy of nature and experimental science permits us to hope for a solution to that problem. What we have come to call the philosophy of nature as opposed to natural science is concerned with the first and more obvious problems arising from our knowledge of the world around us, a knowledge had by everyone and based on no controlled observations. The world as thus known is the world we name and discourse about in ordinary language. Let us look briefly at what De Koninck has to say about the difference between the "natural" language of the philosophy of nature and the symbolic language of mathematical physics.

What differentiates mathematical physics from the doctrine to be found in the *Physics* of Aristotle is that the former proceeds with symbols while the latter makes use of names. What is the nature of this difference? "To define a symbol . . . is simply to interpret the symbol by explaining how it is to be taken, not by stating *what* the thing is to which it refers."[6] Weight, length, indeed all the concepts of mathematical physics, are symbols in this sense.

> It may be helpful to note that, if this type of definition, in which *when* is an essential factor, were the only valid one, the definition of 'man' would have to be something like this: when I tread on something and it produces a series of sounds like, 'Where do you think you're going?,' this *is* man. In other words, all definitions would be interpretations of names or of symbols.[7]

It is well known that it is precisely in its use of symbols that modern science achieves a rigor hardly dreamt of in earlier

[6] "Random Reflections . . .," p. 90. [7] *Ibid.*, pp. 85-86.

times; since this rigor is achieved by a rejection of words and language in the ordinary sense, it is not surprising to find that many who write about science deny that science can be had when we use words as names and attempt to give definitions which express what the things named are. Thus, if Aristotle attempted a science of nature and used names in doing so, his attempt is judged to have failed and failed necessarily: words are hopelessly ambiguous; symbols alone are clear and distinct.

De Koninck approaches such claims concerning symbolic language by pointing out that they are expressed by words which are not symbols; furthermore, when not actually operating with his symbols, the scientist tells us what he has done or will do in the medium of ordinary language which, he assures us, is clearly productive only of ambiguity and confusion. This may seem a trivial point, but that is almost a guarantee of its importance. No matter how much we disparage our "natural" language where words are used as names, we can never emancipate ourselves completely from it. Clearly there is need for ordinary language in the practical order; the question is: is a science of nature possible which makes use of words which are used as names and not symbols?

It is an historical fact that, so long as the study of the physical world made essential use of names, little was achieved to further knowledge of the kind now called physics. Where the Greek philosophers sought to know *what* the things of nature are, we appear to have renounced that type of inquiry for the simple reason that it does not lead to the kind of knowledge about nature actually obtained by another type of method, whose possibilities have only begun to reveal themselves. Is there however any good reason why the former mode of investigation should be abandoned altogether and everywhere? Is it always beside the point to be interested in objects and to ask what things are? The physicist, from the very outset, defines movement by the way he measures it, and that is what movement *is* to him. But does this mean that it can never be anything but irrelevant to ask what movement is, apart from this operational way of defining it? [8]

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 101.

If De Koninck would answer these questions in the negative, he has no illusions that all contemporary philosophers of science would be equally inclined to do so, although he has pointed out a resurgence of interest in the philosophy of nature.

> A growing interest in the subject may now be seen, not so much among professional philosophers, who often prefer to soar off on wings by no means fully fledged into the realms of metaphysics, but among scientists (especially in Germany) who are coming to see that their own knowledge, in its inception as well as in its further development, forms in fact part of the philosophy of nature, and that this truth is an important one for the progress of their understanding of what they achieve.[9]

The importance of language in philosophy is stressed because it is the sign and instrument of our understanding. In a recent study, De Koninck points out the significance for metaphysics of the fact that because our words follow the trajectory of our knowledge, since we name as we know, that ambiguity of natural language lamented by philosophers of science becomes essential to the meaningfulness of metaphysical doctrine. The ambiguity in question is that systematic ambiguity (*aequivocatio a consilio*), also called the analogy of names, which is had when a name first imposed to signify what we first know, sensible things, is retained to name things known only with great difficulty and with dependence on our knowledge of sensible things. "It is an essential task of the *sophos,* of the *sapiens, cujus est ordinare,* to do his best to explain the words he uses by leading them back to meaning that can be verified of things more known and beyond question."[10] De Koninck will have nothing to do with that poor defense of metaphysics which sees it as resting on some special intuition into the objects considered by First Philosophy. In company with St. Thomas, he holds that if we are ever to come to know that there are things which can not only be

[9] "Abstraction from Matter, I," p. 133n.

[10] "Metaphysics and the Interpretation of Words," *Laval théologique et philosophique,* XVII (1961), 31.

defined without matter but as well exist without matter, this knowledge will be inevitably dependent on a prior access to things which exist in matter and are defined with matter. If the philosophy of nature cannot be justified, there is no possible justification of metaphysics, at least as St. Thomas understood this science. Metaphysics has never been a doctrine easily attained and nowadays its defense is a good deal more difficult than hitherto; that defense cannot even begin, however, unless the philosophy of nature is possible.

We see here another insistence on order: there is a natural order of learning the philosophical sciences which reflects the nature of our intellect. We will never achieve philosophically what is first in reality if we do not appreciate what is first in the order of our knowledge. And, just as there is an order among the philosophical sciences, there is a proper order and procedure within each science. In our knowledge of nature, the beginnings are those set forth in the *Physics* of Aristotle; this doctrine is indispensable and of vast importance, but of course it is only a beginning. To achieve the goal set us in the *Physics,* we must go in the direction contemporary science has gone. De Koninck's major point is that to forget this beginning is to forfeit the capacity to appreciate where we have gone. Indeed, utter confusion as to what we are doing can ensue, something De Koninck finds to be the case in biology.

In his *Introduction à l'étude de l'âme* and in the third lecture of *The Hollow Universe,* "The Lifeless World of Biology," De Koninck points out that biology, by the admission of prominent biologists, is no longer able to account for the difference which purports to set its object off from that of physics, namely "living." Indeed, nowadays we proceed in biology as if the most obscure form of life were most manifest to us such that the study of it could cast light on what it means for horses, say, and ourselves to live; further, some would attempt to derive the living from the non-living and thus eradicate the difference

between physics and biology which is the source of so much embarrassment. The net effect is to cast into doubt our ability to know that some things are alive and others are not.

But is there not some experience of life which led to the distinction of living from non-living? Is there not an indubitable instance of life?

> La notion première de la vie, celle à laquelle on devra toujours revenir, nous vient d'abord et principalement de l'expérience interne de vivre. Vivre, c'est toucher, goûter, sentir, entendre, voir; discerner ces sensations les unes des autres, imaginer, se souvenir; aimer, haïr, se mouvoir soi-même de lieu en lieu, se réjouir, s'attrister; comprendre, raisonner, vouloir. La vie nous est d'abord connue dans la conscience de l'exercise même de ces opérations; et si les mots que nous employons pour les désigner peuvent signifier quelque chose pour nous, c'est que nous les rapportons sans peine à ces operations que nous éprouvons en nous-mêmes dans leur exercice.[11]

Without this primitive certitude, there could be no question of psychology or biology. Whatever difficulties we may face in later attempts to decide whether or not something is alive, we remain absolutely certain that we are alive; we have a way of verifying the meaning of "life." This certitude is presupposed by psychology. "Nous voulons simplement faire voir que l'étude de l'âme, laquelle se situe sur le plan de l'universel, présuppose comme point de départ la connaissance d'activités vitales que nous éprouvons d'abord en nous-mêmes, que nous atteignons *in singulari* dans l'expérience interne. Ce n'est évidemment pas ce point de départ que fait le sujet de la psychologie." [12]

However certain our experience of our own life may be, we do not possess in virtue of that certitude a clear and distinct knowledge of soul or life. As against Descartes, De Koninck argues that there is an inverse relation of certitude and clarity at the outset of our study of the living. In our study of the natural

[11] Preface to S. Cantin, *Précis de Psychologie Thomiste* (Quebec, 1948), p. xiii.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

world generally we begin with what is most easily known by us and about which we have great certitude and only with great difficulty arrive at clarity, at knowledge of what is first in reality. To confuse these two orders, to insist that what we first know is first in reality is to deny our true condition.

Descartes maintained that he had a clear and distinct intuition of himself as thinking (as well as of motion) and that he knew God as well as he knew the nature of triangle.

> En vérité, il n'y a pas d'exemples plus visibles du rapport inverse entre la connaissance certaine et la connaissance claire et distincte, que l'expérience de vivre et d'être, et la perception du mouvement; ni d'illustration plus tranchante du rapport inverse entre la cognoscibilité des choses en soi et leur cognoscibilité pour nous, que celle de Dieu. Aussi, marquons bien le tournant critique dans l'histoire de la pensée humaine; il s'achève dans l'identification du certain pour nous, avec la connaissance claire et distincte des choses quant à ce qu'elles sont en leur nature propre. . . . Voici donc un univers conçu à la mesure de l'homme.[13]

We shall be returning to De Koninck's discussion of the practical consequences of apparently remote and theoretical exaggerations. If he sees the dangers inherent in theories about scientific methodology, he does not attack that method as such.

> We are not suggesting that the scientist should change his procedure, only that he should remember the things he had to leave behind. For they have not ceased to exist, and he feels them all the days of his life. He could not physically exist without them. In fact, they contain the most relevant part of his self.[14]

The things left behind by the methodology of mathematical physics are themselves the subject of natural science in the wide sense based on modes of defining. Whatever novelties of method are presented by contemporary science, they are ordered to the increase of our knowledge of a subject matter which has con-

[13] *Ibid.*, p. xxii.

[14] "The Moral Responsibilities of the Scientist," *Laval théologique et philosophique*, VI (1950), 356.

cerned the mind of man since antiquity and about which some knowledge, still valid, had been acquired. By insisting on the order of procedure in our knowledge of the natural world, De Koninck prevents modern science from being cut loose from earlier gains in knowledge, particularly from earlier gains in natural science itself. When it is seen as part of a larger whole, its role within natural science can best be seen, as well as its participation in the value of our knowledge of the natural world for an intellectual ascent to a higher order.

The foregoing should indicate—and, of course, all we can hope to do here is indicate—that De Koninck's efforts have always been in the direction of synthesizing contemporary advances in natural science with the traditional truths of the philosophy of nature. There is no question of an attack on science or its methods; on the contrary, few have done as much as De Koninck to justify those methods and to show their necessity given the very goal of natural science.

> Le but de la philosophie de la nature est de connaître, jusque dans leur dernière concrétion spécifique, ces *logoi* divins et la fin qui les spécifie et qu'ils appelent; de connaître parfaitement l'être naturel dont la forme est séparable et terme de toutes les autres. . . . Toutefois, ce but n'est pour l'étude de la nature qu'une limite dialectique, un terme dont nous pouvons nous approcher sans cesse, mais que nous ne pouvons jamais adéquatement atteindre.[15]

In pursuit of its goal, our mind must make use of abstraction, of symbolic constructions and so forth. The difficulty today is that we have become so impressed by the new scientific methodology that we are suspicious of and impatient with questions which do not make use of that method.

> If such questions were granted to be legitimate, and if meaningful answers to them were possible, what, it might be asked, could we *do* with the answer? In other words, is knowledge worth having which

[15] *De la primauté du bien commun* (Quebec, 1943), p. 160. Hereafter *BC*.

does not mean power? The state of mind which scorns the most basic kind of wonder, and the philosophy which tries to draw the teeth of Hume's sceptical attack on inductive reasoning by restricting the significance of induction to action, have much in common.[16]

This suggests an earlier analysis of the odyssey of modern philosophy to which we now turn.

The analysis in question is the second part of *De la primauté du bien commun,* and it would be difficult to find a critique which is more fundamental.[17] Coming as it does as a sequel to a defense of the common good against the personalists, this critique presupposes that doctrine. Nevertheless, it will be possible for us to sketch De Koninck's understanding of the direction of modern philosophy before we say a few things about the affirmative position. The analysis begins by citing a common tenet of modern philosophers and goes on to show what one would expect to follow from it. If we find the consequences surprising as pure possibilities, we are astonished to find that they have actually been accepted and pushed to an extreme limit.

En dépit de leurs divergences apparentes, les philosophes modernes en général s'accordent à soutenir que la métaphysique ou sagesse spéculative, pour autant qu'elle porte principalement sur des choses meilleures que l'homme, aliène l'homme de lui-même, qu'elle le dépouille de son moi véritable. Etant en quelque sorte surhumaine, elle serait inhumaine. Elle distrairait l'homme de l'effort total qu'il lui faut pour conquérir la terre, et pour répondre à son desir de vivre. Elle serait destructrice de la nature humaine, et par conséquent il faudrait la compter parmi les grands ennemis de l'humanité.[18]

If man were the most perfect thing in the universe, not metaphysics, but political science and prudence would be the most perfect knowledge. Now, in Aristotle, this is a contrary to fact conditional, but De Koninck proposes to entertain as valid that

[16] *The Hollow Universe,* p. 70.
[17] See now C. Fabro, *Introduzione all'Atheismo Moderno* (Rome, 1964).
[18] *BC,* p. 85.

political science and prudence are highest so as to see what consequences follow from the assumption.

The first and most general consequence would be that things would be more or less as we wish them to be. This may seem a rather sweeping conclusion, but let us follow the argument closely.

En effet, la science et la prudence politiques sont pratiques en ce qu'elles dirigent vers une fin conformément à la droite raison. Mais cela présuppose que nous connaissons en quelque façon la nature de la chose à diriger et de la fin, c'est-a-dire que la rectitude de la régulation pratique présuppose la rectification de l'intelligence spéculative. Donc, si par impossible la régulation pratique était indépendante de la verité spéculative, alors ce que les choses sont, ou devraient être, tels l'homme, le bien humain et la société, serait simplement ce que nous aurions voulu qu'elles soient. Même la science pratique ne serait plus science. La simple connaissance pratique ne serait plus vraiment pratique.[19]

From the above it follows that prudence would be indistinguishable from art. The two can be distinguished only if the end of man is given and presupposed by prudence which is then concerned with means of achieving the end; art, on the other hand, chooses the end. Thus, if there is no speculative truth concerning man's nature, if man creates his own end and is free to make of himself what he will, he becomes an effect of his own art: prudence is art. The prudential judgment, like the artistic judgment, would no longer be true because of conformity with rectified appetite; prudence would bear equally on good and evil and the judgment of prudence would be verified only by the result.

Le succès dans la réalisation de la fin choisie serait l'unique critère du bien et du mal. Il serait toujours absurde de vouloir justifier sa conduite, même à ses propre yeux, en pensant ou en disant qu'on a agi selon sa conscience et avec droite intention. Tout écart concret de cette

[19] *Ibid.*, p 86.

fin choisie, fût-il dû à la raison, au hasard ou à la volonté, serait une faute.[20]

The identification of art and prudence, "l'émancipation de l'homme pur *artifex*," makes man the measure of all things. De Koninck sees the denial of the supremacy of the speculative and the resultant confusion of art and prudence as temptations to which man is perpetually open because of the very feebleness of his participation in the intellectual order. Metaphysics, the contemplative life, exceeds what is proportioned to man.

Toujours à cause de la débilité de son intelligence spéculative, l'homme sera tenté d'exalter sa faculté de construire des imitations délectables; il sera tenté de dominer tous les originaux imitables, ceux que sont au-dessus de nous aussi bien que ceux que sont inférieurs. Les beaux-arts, en effet, constituent le moyen le plus humain de rendre plus proportionnés à nous, les objets meilleurs que nous.[21]

The difficulty of knowing things more perfect than man, of being measured by them as we know them, contains the perpetual possibility of a revolt which would make man the measure, the fabricator of himself and of his world, acknowledging nothing superior to himself.

This exaltation of man is not merely a logical possibility. De Koninck sees it realize itself gradually and inexorably in modern thought, beginning with the excesses of Renaissance humanism and terminating in Marxist nihilism. In his *Notre critique du communisme, est-elle bien fondé?* De Koninck indicates that most reactions to Marxism are *ad hoc* and unreal because they fail to see that, far from consisting of an attack on the individual and a desire to submerge him in the mass, Marxism is the most extreme exaltation of the individual.

Une fois que l'homme aura brisé tous ses liens avec quoi que ce soit, il pourra se mouvoir 'autour de lui-même, de son véritable soleil.' Voilà le principe de l'ordre nouveau. Le pur moi. Le moi avec tout ce qu'il tient le plus de lui-même comme pur sujet, voulu, cette fois, comme fin.[22]

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 87. [21] *Ibid.*, p. 90. [22] *Ibid.*, p. 114.

Doubtless man is menaced today more than ever before by the encroachments of a state become an end to itself, a super-individual, forgetful of the true role of government as the instrument of the common good; nevertheless, those who would oppose to communism the rugged individualism of a bygone and unlamented economic period exhibit an almost total ignorance of the philosophical roots of Marxism. Marxism is founded on the denial of any good for man outside of man; that is why it is fundamentally atheistic. De Koninck quotes the basic texts on this point.

La destruction de la religion dit Marx, comme bonheur illusoire du peuple, est une exigence de son bonheur réel. . . . La religion n'est que le soleil illusoire qui se meut autour de l'homme, aussi longtemps qu'il ne se meut pas autour de lui-même.[23]

It is against the background of this Marxist humanism that one must read De Koninck's defense of the common good against those who, while desiring to separate themselves in every way from the atheism of Marx and the chaos of humanism, nevertheless would exalt the person above the common good.

Il ne faudrait pas oublier que, loin d'avoir nié la dignité de la personne humaine, les philosophies qui ont engendré le totalitarisme moderne ont exalté cette dignité plus qu'on ne l'avait jamais fait auparavant. Il importe dès lors de bien determiner en quoi consiste la dignité de l'homme.[24]

That dignity will consist in man's ordination to a good which so far surpasses his capacity that he cannot be ordered to it except as to a common good.

"Le bien est ce que toutes choses désirent en tant qu'elles désirent leur perfection. Donc, le bien a raison de cause finale. Donc, il est la première des causes, et par conséquent, diffusif de soi."[25] As final cause, the good draws things to itself and that good which communicates itself to the greatest number will

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 115. [24] *Ibid.*, p. 1. [25] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

be the most perfect and most common good. The most important point made at the outset of De Koninck's defense of the primacy of the common good is that the common good cannot be opposed to the private good as if the former were an alien good, the good of others and not of myself. In effect, the common good is my good and my most desirable good.

The common good is not the collection of private goods nor is its community to be understood in terms of predicability. We might say that Peter desires his own proper good, John desires his own proper good, and so with all men, from which it would follow that it is common to all men to desire their private good. It is not this kind of community which is meant when it is said that the common good has priority over the private good. Nor is the common good the good of the collectivity and not the good of any of the members taken singly; if this were what is meant by the common good, it would deserve rejection as something alien and unreal. The common good is that good which, while truly mine, is not simply mine but is as well the good of others. In other words, there is a disproportion between my appetite and this good such that it cannot be simply my good, my private good. For example, the good of the family is my good, but it is not simply my good since it is shared by others; moreover, it is for me more desirable than my merely private good. The good of the city, since it extends itself to many families, is more desirable and more perfective than the common good of the family.

The personalist balks at the primacy of the common good because its seems to him to smack of totalitarianism. This is not the case.

> La société humaine est faite pour l'homme. Toute doctrine politique qui ignore la nature raisonnable de l'homme, qui nie, par conséquent, sa dignité et sa liberté, est viciée à la racine et soumet l'homme à des conditions inhumaines. C'est donc à bon droit qu'on s'insurge contre les doctrines totalitaires au nom de la dignité de l'homme.[26]

[26] *Ibid.*, p. 1.

While it is perfectly true that the perfection of man does not lie simply in the common good of political society, we cannot move from this to the assertion that man's personal or private good is better than the common good. If the destiny of man transcends the common good of family and city, this is only because he is ordered to a more perfect common good. De Koninck condemns, with phrases of justifiable scorn, the view that it is man's ordination to God as his personal and not a common good which explains the fact that the family and city are not goods fully perfective of man. God is the good of the human person, but he is the common good par excellence; to speak of God as my personal or private good involves intolerable consequences.

La position selon laquelle le bien de la personne singulière serait, comme tel, superieur au bien de la communauté devient abominable quand on considère que la personne est elle-même le principal objet de l'amour de son bien singulier.[27]

In short, to love what is *de facto* a common good merely to possess it as mine is to love myself more than the common good, that is, I do not then love the common good as common. This attempt to make the common good secondary to the private good of the person leads the personalist to a garish appraisal of why it is that a man can lay down his life for others.[28] Further, if love of God meant only to want to possess Him as my good, there would be no way to distinguish the virtuous and vicious; the devil himself can love God in that fashion.

Une société constituée de personnes qui aiment leur bien privé au-dessus du bien commun, ou qui identifient le bien commun au bien privé, c'est une société, non pas d'hommes libres, mais de tyrans—'et ainsi le peuple tout entier devient comme un tyran' (*De regno,* c. 1)—qui se méneront les uns les autres par la force, et où le chef éventuel n'est que le plus astucieux et le plus fort parmi les tyrans, les sujets eux-mêmes n'étant que des tyrans frustrés.[29]

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[27] *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24. [28] *Ibid.*, pp. 129-133. [29] *Ibid.*, p. 19.

God is the separated common good of the universe, and it is in being related to God as common good that the dignity of the human person consists. Even if there were but one creature, that creature would be ordered to God as a common good, that is, to a good which is so disproportionate to the creature that it must necessarily be loved as a good in which many can participate. Moreover, the common good intrinsic to the universe is the order of creatures, for this is what God primarily intends.

> La fin pour laquelle un effet est produit est ce qu'il y a en lui de bon et de meilleur. Or, ce qu'il y a de bon et de meilleur dans l'univers consiste dans l'ordre de ses parties entre elles, lequel ordre ne peut exister sans distinction; c'est, en effet, cet ordre même qui constitue l'univers dans sa raison de tout, laquelle est ce qu'il y a de meilleur en lui. Donc, l'ordre même des parties de l'univers, et leur distinction, est la fin pour laquelle il a été crée.[30]

It follows that it is impossible to discuss the dignity of the person apart from the common good, both that intrinsic to the universe, its order, and the separated common good of the universe who is God.

These few remarks may suffice to show how De Koninck vindicates the primacy of the common good. If there was any doubt that those who would call this primacy into question in order to preserve (or so they thought) the dignity of the human person were thereby involved in consequences of singular seriousness, this was dissipated by De Koninck's "In Defence of Saint Thomas."[31] This article, which is actually four times the length of the original defense of the common good, was written in reply to a savage review of De Koninck's book. The effectiveness of De Koninck's reply can best be gauged by the sudden demise of personalism as an interpretation of the thought of St. Thomas, nor has anyone since undertaken to question the "thomisticity" of De Koninck's defense of the primacy of the

[30] *Sum. cont. Gent.*, II, 39; *BC*, p. 30.
[31] *Laval théologique et philosophique*, I (1945), 8-109.

common good. Of De Koninck's book Cardinal Villeneuve wrote in the preface: "L'ouvrage que voici n'est pas un livre ordinaire. Il est de pure sagesse."[32] The judgment is correct.

The fact that it is no longer possible to achieve a synthesis comparable to that of St. Thomas can be for us cause both of concern and joy. We may rejoice because it is the very proliferation of knowledge together with advances of method and technique which prevents an overview that can be comprehensive and detailed. But our's is an embarrassment of riches: the very detail of our knowledge makes it impossible for any one man to become truly proficient even in one branch of natural science, and yet we have an ineradicable desire for a unified view and thus run the risk of trying to reduce the whole of reality to the principles and procedures of a department or subdepartment of knowledge. We have seen a number of instances of hasty generalization at the expense of dismissing a good part of reality. Thus, one who has become impressed by the power of the method formalized in mathematical logic may be inclined to reject as pseudo-knowledge any doctrine which does not make use of that method. Paradoxically enough, this rejection cannot be expressed or argued for in the symbolism it would exalt. Such scientism is the end result of a long process of the apotheosis of man, but man has become, in Russell's phrase, a mere bundle of events with no more unity than a pile of stones, indeed, far less.

Of late, in opposition to the philosophy which exalts science and its method, existentialism has attempted to come to the rescue of man. But as Alice discovered in Wonderland, things get curioser and curioser, for existentialism turns out to be a return to the humanism from which scientism springs. De Koninck has written much less of this facet of modern thought, but one short study, "The Nature of Man and Historical

[32] *BC*, p. ix.

Being," [33] has been called by a leading Kierkegaardian one of the best things written on the subject.

Without the acceptance of theoretical doctrine, modern thought is incapable of setting forth a viable practical doctrine. More than ever before, we have need today of the sapiential outlook, a point of view from which we can judge the gains and retrogressions of contemporary thought. That point of view is to be found in the writings of De Koninck, writings which are in great part the products of the contingency of practical demands and academic assignments and which were published for the most part in fairly obscure Canadian periodicals. We would do well to seek them out. At a time when the methodology of the mathematical sciences of nature is leading to undreamt of results and seems effectively to have buried earlier attempts at a science of nature, De Koninck has vindicated the point of view and methodology of the approach to the natural world to be found in the *Physics* of Aristotle.

Moreover, he has argued persuasively that unless the vast panorama of modern science be seen as a prolongation, necessary and fecund, of that ancient and still largely valid beginning, we shall never really appreciate the nature of our accomplishment. In a series of writings, he has shown that such terms as "science," "mathematics," "physics," and "logic" have changed almost beyond recognition and that the ancients were not doing science, mathematics, physics, or logic in the contemporary sense. But once more, this should not lead to the repudiation of the validity of older senses of these terms; indeed, he argued that we can ignore the relation of what we are now doing to what had earlier been accomplished under the guise of the same terminology only at our peril.

It should not be overlooked that, unless we can justify the older sense of "science," for example, it is not only the phi-

[33] *Laval théologique et philosophique,* V (1949), 271-277.

losophy of nature and indeed the whole of perennial philosophy that tumbles but also that queen of the sciences, theology.[34] No doubt it is in this wider persepective that we must view the significance of De Koninck's vindication of the philosophy of nature. The strength of his defense lies in the fact that he sees philosophy arise from a knowledge of the world which, far from being surpassed by contemporary scientific methodology, is clearly presupposed by it. He makes this point in terms of a distinction between names and symbols, as we have seen; however, he does not fall into the trap of claiming that the more philosophical approach[35] to nature is more profound, more ontological, more desirable than the results obtained by the newer methodology, ambiguous as those results may be as manifesting the way things are. The vindication of a knowledge which makes use of names rather than symbolic constructions enables one to defend that theology which the Church has made her own, for it too makes use of names and deserves the appellation "science" only insofar as it participates in some fashion in the notion of science defined in the *Posterior Analytics.* As is well known, Aristotle manifests the nature of science by appeal to a mathematics which is nowadays too readily rejected as being neither mathematics nor science. De Koninck's defense of Aristotle and Euclid—which is never tantamount to a rejection of the *Principia Mathematica*—has, consequently, profound consequences for the nature of theology.

[34] A good proportion, perhaps the bulk, of De Koninck's writings is theological in nature. This can be verified by consulting the articles he contributed to the *Laval théologique et philosophique* from the founding of that pournal in 1945 as well as to *Semaine Religieuse de Québec, Dominicana,* and Canadian Marian periodicals. Mariology was his principal interest, and he was a champion of De Montfort. Four of his seven books were theological, *Ego Sapientia,* already mentioned; *La Piété du Fils, Études sur l'Assomption* (Quebec, 1954); *Le Scandale de la Médiation* (Paris, 1962); *Tout Homme est mon prochain* (Quebec, 1964). The nature of this journal and my own limitations cause me to refrain from discussing De Koninck's theological work.

[35] Cf. *BC,* p. 161 n.

Few contemporary students of St. Thomas make less claim to the title of metaphysician than Charles De Koninck and yet his work, comprised in a few slim volumes and a vast number of essays scattered in obscure journals, contains the general structure of the sapiential judgment presently required, with some elements of that structure developed in great detail. His work is the work of wisdom. We may be sure that he would remind us that it is a borrowed wisdom, the expected fruit of fidelity to St. Thomas who has been named *doctor communis*. The writings of Charles De Koninck stand as a powerful argument for the timeliness of the doctrine of Aquinas.

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