

NOTE FOR SECOND BOOK OF WISDOM, READING ONE

Aristotle does not ask whether man is able to know truth (which perhaps is where a modern philosopher might begin), but he answers the question is it easy or difficult for man to know truth. If man were unable to know truth, he could not know that he is unable to know truth. But it is obvious that man knows many truths. He knows that a whole is more than one of its parts. And how could he not know that statements exist? If you could think that statements do not exist, you would be making a statement.

If you asked a modern professor whether it is easy or difficult to know the truth, he would probably say difficult, if not impossible. But Aristotle says that in one way it is difficult and in another way easy.

He is very brief in showing that truth is difficult for man since this is rarely not seen. But he most of all distinguishes the causes of this difficulty, saying that they can be in the thing or in us. Since ability is knowable through the act for which it is an ability, act is more knowable than ability. Things are knowable to the extent they are in act. Hence, the difficulty we have in knowing matter and motion is in them, that they are not very actual, while the difficulty we have in knowing the separated substances and God who are very much in act must be in us since they are most knowable.

We can apply this distinction to understanding other people. We understand best people who are just like ourselves. But we have difficulty in understanding those who are much less reasonable than we are or those who are much more reasonable than we are. Since a person is understandable to the extent they are reasonable, the difficulty in understanding those less reasonable than us is in them. But the difficulty of understanding those more reasonable than us must be in us

This kind of distinction could be made in other acts, as Thomas teaches us. It is difficult for men to love the ugly or disease and also to love the common good or God. But if something is lovable because it is good, the difficulty in loving the ugly or cancer is in the thing, but the difficulty in loving the common good or God is in the defect of our heart.

But as regards the way in which truth is easy for man, since some might deny that it can be easy for man, Aristotle mainly points out three ways in which it is easy for man. No man can avoid seeing some part of the truth, however small. But the part one man sees may not be the part another man sees. And in some way even much truth is easy for man through the efforts of many. Thus we see the arts and sciences grow by each thinker or worker adding a little bit to the whole. And a third way in which truth is easy for man is that the beginnings are seen to some extent by all. Every man, for example, sees that a whole is more than one of its parts.

The part of the truth which every man sees is the cornerstone of truth for man. To this is added the part that one man sees and another does not see. And through the efforts of many, a large amount is seen in the development of the arts and sciences.

A man is helped by others in the pursuit of truth in two ways. From some, he gets a part of the truth he might not have seen, or seen so quickly, by himself. But he is helped also by those with whom he disagrees. For in reasoning against them, he develops his own mind.

Although Thomas understands the text of Aristotle showing the difficulty in knowing truth by considering both the difficulty in going from the whole to the part and from the parts to the whole, perhaps it would be easier to take the text the way the Greek seems to go: "We have the whole and are unable to see the part." A text of Thomas fitting this reading is this:

...illa sunt priora quae intellectui abstrahenti primo occurrunt.

Haec autem sunt quae plura comprehendunt, vel per modum totius universalis, vel per modum totius integralis;

et ideo magis universalia sunt primo nota intellectui,

et composita componentibus, ut definitum partibus definitionis.

Et secundum hoc quaedam imitatio intellectus in sensu est, qui etiam quodammodo abstracta a materia recipit. Etiam apud sensum

singularia magis communia sunt nota primo, ut hoc corpus quam hoc animal.¹

It is easy to show by example that men seeing the whole have great difficulty in seeing either kind of part. The reason given by Thomas, for both the reason and the senses, is very interesting.

Thomas solves an objection based on mixing up the two causes of difficulty in knowing by the distinction pointed out by Aristotle in the causes of the difficulty in knowing:

4. Praeterea, difficilius est facere aliquid quod est intelligibile in potentia, intelligibile actu, et intelligere illud, quam intelligere illud quod est de se actu intelligibile. Sed intellectus Adae poterat facere species rerum materialium esse intelligibiles in actu, quae de se sunt intelligibiles in potentia, et per hoc intelligere res materiales. Ergo multo fortius poterat intelligere ipsas essentias angelorum, quae de se sunt intelligibiles actu, cum sint a materia immunes.

Ad quartum dicendum, quod difficultas in intelligendo accidit dupliciter; uno modo ex parte cognoscibilis, alio modo ex parte cognoscentis.

Ex parte cognoscibilis difficilius est facere aliquid intelligibile et intelligere ipsum, quam intelligere id quod est in se intelligibile; sed ex parte cognoscentis potest esse difficilius ad cognoscendum id quod est in se intelligibile. Et hoc convenit intellectui humano propter hoc quod non est proportionatus ad intelligendum naturaliter essentias separatas...²

In the following text, Thomas shows how the kind of distinction made about the causes of the difficulty in knowing could also be applied to the opposite of difficulty, easiness:

...sicut dicitur in *// Meta.*, difficultas potest esse ex nobis et ex rebus, et similiter facilitas. Facilitas ergo quae est ex ratione actuum qui non sunt magni ponderis, diminuit, quantum est in se, rationem meriti; sed facilitas quae est ex promptitudine operantis,

¹ In *Boetii de Trinitate*, Proemium, Q. I, Art. 3, C

² *De Veritate*, Q. 18, Art. 5, 4 & Ad 4

meritum non diminuit respectu praemii essentialis, sed auget; quia quanto caritate majori facit, tanto facilius tolerat et magis meretur. Et similiter quanto delectabilius operatur propter habitum virtutis, tanto actus ejus est delectabilior et magis meritorius.³

Although there is difficulty on the side of the object as well as on the side of the knower, the chief difficulty is on the side of the knower. In accord with this, what is more known to us is the less knowable:

accidentia et motus et privationes parum aut nihil habent de entitate; et tamen ista sunt magis nota quoad nos quam substantiae rerum, quia sunt viciniora sensui, cum per se cadant sub sensu quasi sensibilia propria vel communia. Formae substantiales per accidens.⁴

Thomas in many places considers that part of the truth which all men see. He points out that this knowledge is had without investigation and that it is a plantation or nursery containing the natural seeds of all the knowledge that follows afterwards. One such text is the following:

...in natura humana, in quantum attingit angelicam, oportet esse cognitionem veritatis sine inquisitione et in speculativis et in practicis; et hanc quidem cognitionem oportet esse principium totius cognitionis sequentis sive speculativae sive practicae, cum principia oporteat esse stabiliora et certiora.

Unde et hanc cognitionem oportet homini naturaliter inesse, cum hoc quidem cognoscat quasi quoddam seminarium totius cognitionis sequentis; sicut in omnibus naturis sequentium operationum et effectuum quaedam naturalia semina praeexistunt.

Oportet etiam hanc cognitionem habitualement esse, ut in promptu existat ea uti cum fuerit necesse.⁵

³ *Scriptum Super Lib. III Sententiarum*, Dist. XXIII, Q. I, Art. I, Ad 4

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *In VII Metaphysicorum*, lectio II, n. 1304

⁵ *De Veritate*, q. 16, Art. 1, c

A seed in the mind is (1) a beginning that is (2) natural (3) small in size compared to what comes from it and (4) great in power. These seeds are tools of the agent or acting upon understanding and partake of its light:

Cum enim omne quod intelligitur, ex vi intellectualis luminis cognoscatur; ipsum cognitum inquantum huiusmodi includit in se intellectuale lumen ut participatum, ex cuius virtute habet intellectum confortare; sicut patet quando magister tradit discipulo aliquod medium alicuius demonstrationis, in quo participatur lumen intellectus agentis ut in instrumento. Prima enim principia sunt quasi instrumenta intellectus agentis, ut dicit Commentator in III de Anima et similiter omnia principia secunda quae continent propria media demonstrationum.⁶

Since man knows things in a confused way before distinctly, the seed like beginning of our knowledge is in a confused knowledge of all things:

Cognitio autem naturalis humana ad illa potest se extendere quaecumque ductu naturalis rationis cognoscere possumus, Cuius quidem naturalis cognitionis est accipere principium et terminum.

Principium autem eius est in quadam confusa cognitione omnium: prout scilicet homini naturaliter inest cognitio universalium principiorum, in quibus, sicut in quibusdam seminibus, virtute praeexistunt omnia scibilia quae ratione naturali cognosci possunt.

Sed huius cognitionis terminus est quando ea quae in virtute in ipsis principiis sunt, explicantur in actum: sicut cum ex semine animalis, in quo virtute praeexistunt omnia membra animalis, producitur animal habens distincta et perfecta membra, dicitur esse terminus generationis.⁷

Because man sees a part of the truth before the whole, he depends upon others, even in mathematics. But in the other sciences, on account of their difficulty, being above or below our mind, our mind seeing a part of the truth before the whole requires the use of dialectic. Finally, in wisdom which is a universal consideration of truth, not only is dialectic especially important, but

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, Q. 9. Art 1, Ad 2

⁷ *De Veritate*, Q. 18, Art 4, corpus

there is also a dependence upon the particular sciences whereby we are led by the hand towards the very universal consideration of the wise man.

We should go forward with the help of reasonable thinkers before us. This is possible even when they disagree in three ways. We can find a common basis among them despite their disagreements and become strong in it. We can gather the parts of truth divided among them. Reasonable guess have some part of the truth in them. And since all or most of them are mistaken, at least in part (if they all disagree, all or all but one of them must be mistaken at least in part), we can learn from their mistakes.

Exercise of reason was the first thing for which dialectic was said to be useful in the book *About Places*. But the errors of reason are also useful to exercise the reason. As the Poet says:

always the dullness of the fool is the whetstone of the wits⁸

Watson came to realize that he was one of these whetstones to Holmes:

The relations between us in those latter days were peculiar. He was a man of habits, narrow and concentrated habits, and I had become one of them. As an institution I was like the violin, the shag tobacco, the old black pipe, the index books, and others perhaps less excusable. When it was a case of active work and a comrade was needed upon whose nerves he could place some reliance, my role was obvious. But apart from this I had uses. I was a whetstone for his mind. I stimulated him. He liked to think aloud in my presence. His remarks could hardly be said to be made to me - many of them would have been as appropriately addressed to his bedstead - but none the less, having formed the habit, it had become in some way helpful that I should register and interject. If I irritated him by a certain methodical slowness in my mentality, that irritation served only to make his own flame-like intuitions and

⁸ Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act I, Sc. 2, Celia

impressions flash up the more vividly and swiftly. Such was my humble role in our alliance.⁹

Watson, by his mistakes, could even be helpful to lead Sherlock Holmes sometimes to the truth:

"Really, Watson, you excel yourself," said Holmes, pushing back his chair and lighting a cigarette. "I am bound to say that in all the accounts which you have been so good as to give of my own small achievements, you have habitually underrated your own abilities. It may be that you are not yourself luminous, but you are a conductor of light. Some people without possessing genius have a remarkable power of stimulating it. I confess, my dear fellow, that I am very much in your debt."

He had never said as much before, and I must admit that his words gave me keen pleasure, for I had often been piqued by his indifference to my admiration and to the attempts which I had made to give publicity to his methods. I was proud, too, to think that I had so far mastered his system as to apply it in a way which earned his approval. He now took the stick from my hands and examined it for a few minutes with his naked eyes. Then with an expression of interest he laid down his cigarette, and carrying the cane to the window, he looked it over again with a convex lens.

"Interesting, though elementary", said he as he returned to his favourite corner of the settee. "There are certainly one or two indications upon the stick. It gives us the basis for several deductions."

"Has anything escaped me?" I asked with some self-importance. "I trust that there is nothing of consequence which I have overlooked?"

⁹ *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, "The Case book of Sherlock Holmes", 'The Adventure of the Creeping Man', Garden City publishing Co. Inc.; p. 1938, pp. 1261-1262

"I am afraid, my dear Watson, that most of your conclusions were erroneous. When I said that you stimulated me I meant, to be frank, that in noting your fallacies I was occasionally guided towards the truth."¹⁰

Although we might see some conclusions from the beginnings of demonstration at once, the further conclusions seen through many steps may require that we be led by the hand of a teacher:

ex principiis demonstrationis statim aliquae conclusiones eliciuntur, quaedam vero non nisi per multa media; et ad haec cognoscenda non potest quilibet per se, sed oportet quod ab alio manuducatur.¹¹

One should have the attitude and docility of Alec Macdonald in learning from those wiser than we are:

Those were the early days at the end of the '80's, when Alec MacDonald was far from having attained the national fame which he has now achieved. He was a young but trusted member of the detective force, who had distinguished himself in several cases which had been intrusted to him...Twice already in his career had Holmes helped him to attain success, his own sole reward being the intellectual joy of the problem. For this reason the affection and respect of the Scotchman for his amateur colleague were profound, and he showed them by the frankness with which he consulted Holmes in every difficulty. Mediocrity knows nothing higher than itself; but talent instantly recognizes genius, and MacDonald had talent enough for his profession to enable him to perceive that there was no humiliation in seeking the assistance of one who already stood alone in Europe, both in his gifts and in his experience.¹²

¹⁰ *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, "The Hound of the Baskervilles", Chapter I, Gardens City Publishing co. Inc. 1938, p. 784

¹¹ Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, Q. 8, Art. 4, Ad 12

Is the word *manuductio* here being used in a broader sense than by Dionne so that both things the teacher does could be called *manuductio*?

¹² *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, "The Valley of Fear", Part One, Chapter I (p. 908 Garden city publishing Co., Inc. , 1938)

The words *Mediocrity knows nothing higher than itself; but talent instantly recognizes genius* can be applied to the division of the middle group in Hesiod's distinction. Among those who can learn from another what they cannot discover by themselves, some know from whom they can learn and others do not.

Is the dependence of the learner upon the teacher something bad? Is the defect of being unable to discover the great truths by oneself something bad?

In considering this question, it should be known that not every defect is something bad. As Thomas explains:

quia malum privatio est boni, et non negatio pura...non omnis defectus boni est malum, sed defectus boni quod natum est et debet haberi.

Defectus enim visionis non est malum in lapide sed in animali; quia contra rationem lapidis est, quod visum habeat.

Similiter etiam contra rationem creaturae est, quod in esse conservatur a seipsa: quia idem dat esse et conservat. Unde iste defectus non est malum creaturae.¹³

The use of the word *defectus* here should be studied. Does nature or God intend that every man should be able to discover the great truths by himself or even be able to learn them from another? Or does nature and God intend that a few should be able to make the great discoveries and some to learn them from the former and some to be incapable of discovery or learning them from another. Does nature and God intend the equality or the inequality of our minds? An order of minds presupposes an inequality of them and both nature and God love order.

Karl Marx sees man's dependence upon God as something bad, but it is not something bad. For it is against the nature of the creature that it have existence from itself or that it be conserved in existence from itself. It would seem to be by pride that Marx is deceived into thinking that what is not bad is bad.

¹³ *Summa Theologiae*, Prima Pars, Q. 48, Art 5. Ad 1

Likewise, many moderns see the dependence of the learner upon a teacher as bad. They think that it is bad if the student does not reach his judgments independently of the teacher. They see the support which the reason of the student gets from believing a worthy mind as bad. Pride might also be a cause of this deception.

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