



A PREFACE TO METAPHYSICS. FIRST LECTURE: ON THOMISM

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I. Living Thomism

1. Thomism is not a museum piece. No doubt, like other systems of medieval philosophy, indeed, philosophic systems of all ages, it must be studied historically. All the great philosophies whether of the Middle Ages or any other period have that in their substance which to an extent triumphs over time. But Thomism does so more completely than any other since it harmonises and exceeds them all, in a synthesis which transcends all its components. It is relevant to every epoch. It answers modern problems, both theoretical and practical. In face of contemporary aspirations and perplexities, it displays a power to fashion and emancipate the mind. We therefore look to Thomism at the present day to save,

in the speculative order, intellectual values, in the practical order, so far as they can be saved by philosophy, human values.

In short, we are concerned not with an archaeological but with a living Thomism. It is our duty to grasp the reality and the requirements of such a philosophy. This duty gives rise to a double obligation. We must defend the traditional wisdom and the continuity of the *Philosophia Perennis* against the prejudices of modern individualism, in so far as it values, seeks and delights in novelty for its own sake, and is interested in a system of thought only in so far as it is a creation, the creation of a novel conception of the world. But equally we must show that this wisdom is eternally young and always inventive, and involves a fundamental need, inherent in its very being, to grow and renew itself. And so doing we must combat the prejudices of those who would fix it at a particular stage of its development and fail to understand its essentially progressive nature.

II. Metaphysics Are Of Necessity Traditional And Permanent

2. We must recall the Thomist view of human teaching. We must remember that man is a social animal primarily because he is in need of teaching, and the teacher's art, like the doctor's, co-operates with nature, so that the *Principal Agent* in the art of instruction is not the teacher imparting knowledge to his pupil and producing it in his mind, but the understanding, the intellectual vitality of the pupil who receives, that is to say, assimilates the knowledge actively into his mind and so brings knowledge to birth there. But we must not forget that without the transmission of ideas elaborated by successive generations the individual mind could make little progress in the research and discovery of truth. In

view of this fact the need of a tradition is evident.

Obviously to reject the continuity produced by the common labour of generations and the transmission of a doctrinal deposit—above all in the very order of understanding and knowledge—is to opt for darkness. But do not the facts give the lie to my thesis, however obvious it may seem? Revolutions of technique and in the natural sciences present us with the spectacle of progress by *Substitution*, and this, moreover, as a general and seemingly universal phenomenon. The railway has replaced the stage-coach, electric light the oil lamp. Einstein's system has dethroned Newton's, as the Copernican had dethroned the Ptolemaic astronomy. We are strongly tempted to generalise, to believe that this type of progress should be extended to every domain of intellectual activity. Was not medieval philosophy replaced by the Cartesian? Did not Kant oust Descartes, to be ousted in turn by Bergson, and will not Bergson make way for some other philosopher, Whitehead perhaps or Heidegger? And while we still wait for the advent of an antideterminist variety of materialism, a revival of hylozoism is taking shape under the dictatorship of the proletariat.

In view of all this we are shocked if we are told of a knowledge which applies today the same fundamental concepts, the same principles as in the days of Sankhara, Aristotle or St. Thomas.

3. I have often answered this objection by pointing out that it is a gross blunder to confuse the art of the philosopher with the art of the tailor or milliner. I have shown also that truth cannot be subjected to a chronological test. Nevertheless the question must be examined more thoroughly. We shall then distinguish two very different types of progress, proper, respectively to wisdom and the science of phenomena.

II. "Mystery" And "Problem"

4. Making use of terminology borrowed from a contemporary French philosopher, M. Gabriel Marcel (see, *Position et Approches du mystère ontologique*), though I am employing it in a completely different sense, we may say that every scientific question presents a double aspect, the one a *Mystery*, the other a *Problem*. It is a mystery and at the same time a problem, a mystery in regard to the thing, the object as it exists outside the mind, a problem in regard to our formulae.

An intelligible mystery is not a contradiction in terms. On the contrary, it is the most exact description of

reality. Mystery is not the implacable adversary of understanding. This unreal opposition was introduced by Descartes and his Cartesian reason, though it is indeed inevitable in an idealist system or an idealist atmosphere. The objectivity of the understanding is itself supremely mysterious and the object of knowledge is "Mystery" reduced to a state of intelligibility in act and of intellection in act. In the act of understanding the intellect becomes what is other than itself, precisely as such. It introduces into itself an inexhaustible (transobjective—on this term see my *Les Degrés du Savoir*, Ch. TIL, p. 176 sqq.) reality vitally apprehended as its object. Its object is reality itself. Like the act of faith the act of understanding does not stop at the formula but attains the object, *non terminatur ad enuntrabile, sed ad rem* (*Sum Theol.* 11-11, i, 2 ad 2). The "Mystery" is its food, the other which it assimilates.

The proper object of understanding is being. And being is a mystery, either because it is too pregnant with intelligibility, too pure for our intellect which is the case with spiritual things, or because its nature presents a more or less impenetrable barrier to understanding, a barrier due to the element of non-being in it, which is the case with becoming, potency and above all matter.

The mystery we conclude is a fullness of being with which the intellect enters into a vital union and into which it plunges without exhausting it. Could it do so it would be God, *ipsum Esse subsistens* and the author of being. The Supreme "mystery" is the supernatural mystery which is the object of faith and theology. It is concerned with the Godhead Itself, the interior life of God, to which our intellect cannot rise by its unaided natural powers. But philosophy and science also are concerned with mystery, another mystery, the mystery of nature and the mystery of being. A philosophy unaware of mystery would not be a philosophy.

Where then shall we discover the pure type of what I call the "problem?" In a crossword puzzle, or an anagram.

At this extreme there is *no* ontological content. There is an intellectual difficulty with no being behind it. There is a logical difficulty, a tangle of concepts, twisted by a mind which another mind seeks to unravel. When the tangle has been unravelled, the difficulty solved, there is nothing further, nothing more to be known. For the only thing to be discovered was how to disentangle the threads. When Oedipus has discovered the key to the riddle, he can proceed on his way leaving the Sphinx behind him. The "problem" may be described as a notional complex created by our intellect, which at first appears inextricable and which must be disentangled. I am speaking of the problem in its pure state. You will soon see that there are other cases in which the "problem" aspect reappears, but no longer

isolated, in combination with the "mystery" aspect.

5. In fact every cognitive act, every form of knowledge presents these two aspects. "The mystery and the problem are *combined*. The mystery is present because there is always some degree of being, and its depth and thickness must be penetrated. The problem also because our nature is such that we can penetrate being only by our conceptual formulae, and the latter of their nature compose a problem to be solved.

But according to the particular kind of knowledge one or the other aspect is predominant.

The problem aspect naturally predominates where knowledge is least ontological, for example, when it is primarily concerned with mental constructions built up around a sensible datum—as in empirical knowledge, and in the sciences of phenomena; or again when its objects are entities constituted or reconstituted by the intellect, which though certainly based on reality, need not exist outside the mind but may equally well be purely ideal as in mathematics; or yet again when its object is mental constructions of the practical intellect as in craftsmanship and applied science. It is in fact, in this third category that the problem aspect is particularly evident. In mathematics and the sciences of phenomena it is well to the fore and indeed predominates. But the mystery aspect is also very pronounced, especially when a discovery is made or when a science is revolutionised or passes through a crisis. The mystery aspect, as we should expect, predominates where knowledge is most ontological, where it seeks to discover, either intuitively or by analogy, being in itself and the secrets of being; the secrets of being, of knowledge and of love, of purely spiritual realities, of the First Cause (above all of God's interior life). The mystery aspect is predominant in the philosophy of nature and still more in metaphysics. And, most of all in theology.

Where the problem aspect prevails one solution follows another: where one ends, the other begins. There is a rectilinear progress of successive mental views or ideal perspectives, of different ways of conceptualising the object. And if one solution is incomplete, as is always the case, it is *replaced* by its successor. It is as when the landscape changes and scene succeeds to scene as the traveller proceeds on his way. Similarly the mind is on the move. Progress of this kind is progress by substitution.

On the other hand where the mystery aspect prevails the intellect has to penetrate more and more deeply the *same* object. The mind is stationary turning around a fixed point. Or rather it pierces further and further into the same depth. This is progress in the same place, progress by *deepening*. Thus the

intellect, as its habitus grows more intense, continues, as John of Saint Thomas puts it, to assault its object, the same object, with increasing force and penetration, *vehementius et profundius*. Thus we can read and reread the same book, the Bible for example, and every time discover something new and more profound. Obviously under the conditions of human life, progress of this kind requires an intellectual tradition, the firm continuity of a system based on principles which do not change.

Here knowledge is not exactly constituted by the addition of parts, still less by the substitution of one part for another. It is the whole itself that grows or rather is more deeply penetrated (every spatial metaphor is inadequate) as an indivisible whole and in all its parts at once.

6. At this point we must distinguish three kinds of intellectual thirst and three corresponding means of quenching them.

In the first case, where the problem aspect predominates I thirst to know the answer to my problem. And when I have obtained the answer I am satisfied: *that particular* thirst is quenched. But I thirst for something else. And so interminably.

This is the water of science, useful and bitter.

In the second case where the mystery aspect predominates I thirst to know reality, *being* under one or other of its modes, the ontological mystery. When I know it I drink my fill. But I still thirst and continue to thirst for the same thing, the same reality which at once satisfies and increases my desire. Thus I never cease quenching my thirst from the same spring of water which is ever fresh and yet I always thirst for it.

This is the water of created wisdom.

To this wisdom the text may be applied, “They who eat me hunger still and they who drink me still thirst” (Ecclesiasticus xxxiv. 20).

In the third case—the vision of God's Word face to face—my thirst is again different. I thirst to see God and when I see Him my thirst will be completely quenched. I shall thirst no longer. And this is already in

a measure true of the earthly commencement of bliss, the participation in time of eternal life.

This is the water of uncreated wisdom of which it is written ““Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst, but the water that I shall give him shall become in him a fountain of water springing up unto everlasting life” (John iv. 13-14).

The climax of spiritual disorder is to confuse the third of these thirsts with the first, by treating the things of eternal life, the vision of God, as an object of the first thirst that namely which belongs to the first case of which I was just speaking, the category of knowledge in which the *problem* predominates. For this is to treat beatitude, not as a mystery, our mystery par excellence, but as a problem or series of problems, like the solution of a puzzle. As a result of this confusion Leibnitz can declare that beatitude is a moving from one pleasure to another, and Lessing that he prefers endless research to the possession of truth which would be *monotonous*, and Kant considers the boredom which it would seem God must experience in the everlasting contemplation of Himself.

But it is also a radical disorder to confuse the second thirst with the first by treating philosophy, metaphysics, wisdom—a category of knowledge in which reverence for the mystery of being is the highest factor—as an object of the first thirst, pre-eminently a problem to answer, a puzzle to solve. Those who make this mistake attempt to make progress in wisdom by proceeding from puzzle to puzzle, replacing one problem by another, one Weltanschauung by its successor, as though in virtue of an irrefragable law. Progress by substitution is required by the sciences of phenomena, is their law, and the more perfectly they realise their type the more progress they make. But progress of this kind is not the law of wisdom. Its progress is progress by an adhesion of the mind to its object and a union with it increasingly profound, progress as it were by a growing intimacy. And it therefore requires as its indispensable prerequisite a stable body of doctrine and a continuous intellectual tradition.

7. Two considerations may now be advanced which reinforce the proof that a philosophic tradition and a stable continuity are indispensable for wisdom.

The first of these is provided by Christian thought and its force is therefore confined to Christians. It concerns the relation between philosophy and theology. Since it is founded on the words of God, indeed upon the *Word* of God, it is obvious that theology must be permanent. “Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.” The science, rooted in the faith, which develops and explains in terms of conceptual reasoning the meaning of these divine words—the science we call

theology—cannot therefore be substantially changed in the course of time, cannot progress by successive substitutions. It does progress, but of all sciences built up by discursive reasoning, its progress is the most stable and, more perfectly than the progress of any other science, is a progress by entering ever more intimately.

Theology, however, makes use of philosophy. Philosophy is the means and the instrument of its development. Philosophy, therefore, must be in its own fashion also permanent. That is why the Christian, we may remark, finds the notion of a permanent philosophic wisdom easier to accept. For superior to philosophy but connected with it he possesses a typical example of a science rooted in mystery.

There is, however, a certain risk that we may confuse these two kinds of certainty and stability, those proper respectively to theology and philosophy, and ascribe to philosophy and its doctrinal continuity the stability of a higher order peculiar to theology. It is true that even the stability of theology is not absolute, for its continuity is not immutability but progress by penetration and admits therefore, of many discoveries, renewals and unexpected explanations. But even so theology is far more strictly and essentially traditional than philosophy. Its continuity is of another order and imitates more closely the immutability of uncreated Wisdom.

8. The second confirmation is the spectacle of modern man and the modern mind. It thus possesses special weight for us moderns. I have in mind what may be called the peculiar experience of the modern world, all the attempts it has made to alter the nature of wisdom. The experiment has certainly been carried out. After Descartes had denied the scientific value of theology, and Kant the scientific value of metaphysics, we have witnessed human reason gone astray and a captive to empiricism seeking wisdom more anxiously than ever before, yet failing to find it, because it has rejected the sense of mystery and has attempted to subject wisdom to the alien law of progress by substitution. It turns now towards the east, now towards the west. Will wisdom come from one quarter or the other? It does not even possess the criteria by which wisdom could be recognised and is blown about by every chance wind of desire.

It is a remarkable fact that Thomas Aquinas did not impress the form of his wisdom on the final phase of medieval culture. From this point of view Thomism was not a "cultural success" on medieval soil. It has been, so to speak, laid up in the heaven of the Church. St. Thomas thus belongs to the Church's great gift of prophecy. He assumes the figure, if I may so put it, of a prophetic saint, a prophetic sage. He is a

saint reserved for the future. His reappearance in our time, as leader of a universal movement of philosophic enquiry, the advent of a period in the development of Thomism unlike any that went before it, assumes when viewed in this light a most striking significance. In the depths of the mind we hear the summons to fashion a universal Christian wisdom at the very moment when the progress of the sciences and of reflexion enable us to give it its full scope and when the world, everywhere labouring under the same distresses and increasingly united in its culture and the problems with which it is faced, can or *could* be moulded into conformity with this wisdom. May we say that it *still could* be moulded or must we say that it *could have been* moulded if only the clerks, as M. Benda calls them, had but understood and willed accordingly, fashioned by this wisdom to receive from it a reasonable order?

III. Metaphysics Is Necessarily Progressive And Inventive

9. I have spoken of the obligation imposed upon us by the continuity of wisdom. I have now to speak of another also of urgent necessity. We have not only to defend the value and necessity of a philosophic tradition against the prejudices of minds revolutionary on principle. We must also take due account of the constant novelty characteristic of philosophic wisdom, and defend the necessity of renovation and growth inherent in its nature, in this case against the prejudices of minds conservative on principle and hidebound.

As we know, it was the task of St. Thomas to renovate the older scholasticism. It is a similar task which Thomists are called upon to perform to-day, a task whose novelty may well be greater than they themselves realise. In this connection many questions require examination and a complete analysis needs to be undertaken. For this there is no time. It must suffice to point out the fact.

But if you have understood what has just been explained you will understand that this work must be accomplished without detriment to the fixity of principles. Nor must it be accomplished by adding heterogeneous parts after the fashion in which those branches of knowledge progress in which the problem aspect, the puzzle, tends to become as important as the mystery aspect. For this reason I dislike the term “Neo-scholasticism” or “Neo-thomism.” It involves the risk of pulling us down from the higher plane of wisdom to the lower plane of the problematic sciences and thereby leading us logically to demand for Thomism also a progress by substitution in which the *Neo* would devour the *T*homism.

This work must be accomplished by a vital assimilation and an immanent progress—as it were, by the progressive autogenesis of the *same* intellectual organism, constantly building up and entering into

itself, by a species of transfiguration of which the growth of corporeal organisms is a very imperfect image. Think of a baby and that baby grown to an adult. Its metaphysical personality has not changed, it remains entire. Nor have any heterogeneous parts been engrafted from without. But everything in that human individual has been transfigured, has become more differentiated, stronger, better proportioned. At every decisive phase of growth the man has been more profoundly transfigured while remaining more profoundly himself and realising himself more perfectly.

10. The part played in a progress of this kind by other philosophic systems is considerable. As I have pointed out elsewhere a system with faulty foundations is a system adapted to the vision of one epoch and one epoch alone. For this very reason its less solid armour enables it to throw itself more quickly—though only to perish—upon the novel aspects of truth appearing above the contemporary horizon. All these systems which lack a sufficient foundation compose a merely potential philosophy, a philosophy in a state of flux, covering contradictory formulas and irreconcilable doctrines and upheld by whatever truth these may contain.

If there exists on earth a philosophic system securely based on true principles, and such I believe Thomism to be, it will incorporate—with more or less delay due to the intellectual laziness of Thomists—and thus progressively realise in itself this potential philosophy which will thereby become to that extent visible and capable of formulation, formed and organically articulated. Thus, in my opinion, Thomism is destined to bear with it, in its own progress, the progress of philosophy. By assimilating whatever truth is contained in these partial systems it will expand its own substance and deduce from it more and more penetrating shafts of light which will reveal the forces concealed in its truths. The novelty which it thus displays, though not seeking it for its own sake, is above all a novel approach to the same shores of being, a new distribution of the same wealth, the pregnant mystery of things. New prospects are being constantly opened up of the same intelligible world, the same incorporeal landscape which seem to transform it before our eyes and make us enter more deeply into the secrets of its beauty.

11. A particular question must be raised at this point, that of vocabulary. The fundamental concepts remain the same, they do not *change*. But we must reach them by new paths, so far at least as the method of treatment is concerned. The question arises whether the old names are still appropriate in all cases.

In this connection we must bear in mind that the fashion in which the ancients formed their

philosophical vocabulary was admirably spontaneous, supple and living, but also imperfect and almost excessively natural. They relied with a robust confidence upon common sense and upon the language which objects utter by their sensible appearances. For their intuitive intelligence was sufficiently powerful and sufficiently fresh to transcend these media. Thus it was that when they defined living being they thought primarily of that which changes its position, moves of itself. There is, in fact, no better definition. But it requires a prolonged critical examination and elaboration. "The terminology of the ancients was apparently—I mean in respect of the objects from which the metaphorical signification was derived—more material than our own, not at all to the taste of our more refined contemporaries. In reality—that is, in respect of the meaning itself—it was more spiritual and went straight to the heart of things.

Because to-day we have become duller ourselves and more exacting, we require a vocabulary less charged with matter, less spontaneous, more remote from the senses, or rather renovated by a new contact—more penetrating and more deliberate, like our art itself— with sensible objects, by a new germination of the mental word in ourselves. In this respect philosophy is in the same case as poetry. Like poetic images philosophic terms are blunted. The creation of a new vocabulary by depriving the understanding of the assistance provided by custom and by a social security already achieved compels it to pay exclusive attention to the vital process in which the idea is born of images and phantasms and the experience of life.

Though these questions of vocabulary are not unimportant, their importance is obviously secondary in comparison with doctrine. Nor must we forget that although these innovations of terminology are calculated to diminish certain obstacles produced in many modern minds by the influence, which is in truth below the level of philosophy, of associated ideas and by the reactions of sensibility, they will never make the voice of intelligible being audible to those who lack the ear for it or who close their ears to it. Nor will they suffice to create a vocabulary common to all philosophers. For terminology is essentially dependent upon doctrine, and a common vocabulary presupposes a common doctrine.

"All life and joy is motion. That of time and vulgar souls is linear, and so not without change of place; and good to them is known only in the coming and going. With souls of grace it is not so. They go about a centre, which planetary motion is their joy. They have also a self-revolving motion which is their peace. Their own regularity enables them to perceive the order of the universe. Their ears with inmost delectation catch the sound of the revolving spheres. They live in fruition of the eternal novelty" (Coventry Patmore, *Aphorisms and Extracts*).

Featured image: *"Promenade en barque aux Andelys (Boat-ride to Andelys)," by Henri Lebasque, painted in 1915.*

