

**PHILOSOPHY AND THE CATHOLIC STUDENT**

"Let us then, in the first place, be careful of admitting into our souls the notion that there is no truth or health or soundness in any arguments at all; but let us rather say that there is as yet no health in us, and that we must quit ourselves like men and do our best to gain health—you and all other men with a view to the whole of your future life, and I myself with a view to death. For at this moment I am sensible that I have not the temper of a philosopher; like the vulgar I am only a partisan. For the partisan, when he is engaged in a dispute, cares nothing about the rights of the question, but is anxious only to convince his hearers of his own assertions."

"The soul of a philosopher . . . will make herself a calm of passion, and follow reason, and dwell in her, beholding the true and the divine (which is not matter of opinion), and thence derive nourishment. Thus she seeks to live while she lives, and after death she hopes to go to her own kindred and to be freed from human ills."

Plato, in the dialogue known as *The Phaedo*, puts these words into the mouth of Socrates, who has been sentenced to death because he will not renounce philosophy and his own mission of encouraging interest in it among the young men of Athens. The *Phaedo* is a challenge to all who read it to devote themselves to philosophy, Catholic students not excepted.

BUT WHY SHOULD A CATHOLIC STUDENT HAVE ANY INTEREST IN PHILOSOPHY? IS IT NOT ENOUGH THAT HE "HAS THE FAITH?"

It is quite true that the Faith is the beginning and end of all things for a man in this life. It is equally true that it is a man that has the Faith. When a man—by definition a rational being—becomes a student, he enters ex professo on a way of life which is dominated by the scientific outlook. By the very fact of becoming a student he pledges himself to the full use of his "rationality" in the service of a judicial objectivity. No matter how particularised the field of study may be which he takes for his own, he will always find that he is asking "why", and seeking the reason for things; in some sense he has begun to look for the cause or causes of things. If the student thinks—in other words, if he fulfils himself as a rational being and does not merely act as a counting machine or a gramophone—he has, at least implicitly, become a philosopher.

**PITFALLS : i. PARTICULARISM**

The point could well be elaborated considerably, for it is at this stage that many people become bad philosophers. They have learnt the method of science<sup>1\*</sup> in their particular field, and

<sup>1\*</sup>By science we here mean not only the pragmatic and experimental sciences, but all ordered thinking which attempts to discover the reason for and the intelligibility of things.

without stopping to consider whether further and more profound analysis is not necessary before formulating a world view, they elevate a particular truth or principle to the transcendental level, with fatal results. It is important to grasp this. The whole experience of mankind asserts that man is rational; that he is someone who of his very nature demands a metaphysical explanation of the world, an explanation which, transcending the limits of sensible experience and those of the experimental sciences, will discuss the nature of the real in terms of the universal and the necessary. Whether some consider that such knowledge is illusory is beside the point; the fact remains that it is the "ideal" standpoint to which the student of reality, of that which is, of what philosophers term Being, constantly returns.

We can clarify by restatement. The student has a particular sphere of work. He comes to know the limits and the depths of that sphere. Within it, if he is a good student, he does not mistake what is given for what is merely hypothetical, and he will be able to point to the problems of his particular science which are yet unsolved. So far so good. The danger is that he may mistake his particular science, and the method most productive of results in it, for philosophy and for the philosophic method. Because a mechanistic explanation has been successful in his particular subject matter he will be tempted, without further examination, to explain reality, the Being of things, in terms of it. If he does so, he is guilty of assuming that the particular is the general, and instead of proceeding to analyse and discuss the principles of the particular sciences in a wider context, he will find himself attempting to solve transcendental questions by the methods of a particular science which, by reason of its particularity, cannot even recognise the problem on a transcendental level.

That is to say, the first danger of the incipient philosopher is that of thinking that any principle which unifies in a particular sphere is also the principle of universal unity, of mistaking the part for the whole.

#### PITFALLS : ii. RATIONALISM

The second pitfall is that of "rationalism." A student as it were attacks reality, attempts to dominate it by his mind in order to render it intelligible. He has, let us say, some success. He is able to understand reality in terms of a conceptual system. There are difficulties—properly problems—about his formulation of this system, but it appears to him to be a question of formulation only. It is one of the lessons taught repeatedly by the history of philosophy that reality—Being—is so profound, contains such depths, that any premature systemisation leads to an inevitable reaction. In the first flush of enthusiasm real pro-

gress is made, but the philosopher assumes too quickly that he has exhausted the depths of the real and has confined Being in a simple and lucid formula. His successors discover, what should have been realised at the start, that reality is in a sense inexhaustible; that philosophy, as M. Maritain has pointed out, has its "mysteries." They are mysteries into which we can plunge ever deeper, but which elude our grasp owing either to the fact that some objects have an intelligibility too subtle for our minds ever wholly to comprehend, or, at the opposite pole, to the fact that other objects are indefinable owing to the element of potentiality intrinsic to their being.

A superficial "rationalism" based on a blindness, an inability to apprehend the depths and splendour of reality, and on attempts to eliminate the element of mystery, can and does lead to that sophistic ignorance against which Socrates waged war. A shallow clarity, induced by the limitations of our concepts and experience, leads some students to construct systematised ideal worlds, only to have their constructions broken up by the unrelenting pressure of the real.

#### THE PHILOSOPHER'S GOAL.

The philosopher is in search of the first cause or principle of reality—ultimate Being. Not for the principle of this or that reality, but of the reality which is ultimate. His viewpoint is not, then, particular, but cosmic and universal. This being so, he is able to recognise reality, whether it comes to him in the form of static truth or as significant dynamic event, as requiring a deep investigation in terms of universal principles. If he is able to see this he is well equipped for starting on the true task of philosophy, the attempt to discover what is the unifying principle to which all other principles must ultimately be referred. The learning of this truth early in his career will prevent him at the outset from confusing his perceptions and conceptualisations of Being with the ultimate intelligibility of Being as such.

#### THE CATHOLIC STUDENT'S APPROACH TO PHILOSOPHY

The discussion can now be taken a stage farther. We are talking not about simply any student, but about the Catholic student, one who belongs to the universal Church, to a religious body whose outlook on all problems partakes of the universality we have been considering. His religion will have helped him from childhood to recognise his own individual ignorance in the face of truth, and will have influenced him against all kinds of sectionalism. It is difficult to imagine a really fervent Catholic student who so completely loses sight of the universal vision and ultimate truth of which he is given a glimpse in his faith, as to construct a particularist world view in opposition to it.

Our question, however, is not completely resolved in these

terms. Even if the individual student has learned the lesson of ignorance, yet if he is in any sense a student that ignorance will be a "learned ignorance." In other words, by using his reason he has discovered the limits of his own knowledge, he can distinguish between a demonstration, a hypothesis, and a prejudice, and above all he can account for his knowledge in terms of cause and effect. His knowledge may be limited, but it is knowledge; not a mere matter of prejudice based on authoritative dicta, but a science rising from principles clearly seen as demanded by the data and verified in application. As a scientist he is chary of trusting to authority—the ipse dixit of a master—he rightly wants to see. But he is also a Catholic, a member of an authoritative religion. We must go on to attempt to unravel, in some measure, the difficulty apparently presented by the possibility of tension rising between the fact that as a Catholic the student accepts what the Church teaches, while as a philosopher he demands to see.

#### PHILOSOPHY AND REVEALED TRUTH

The student, working as a philosopher, has discovered the mystery of reality and of Being, and as a philosopher he has discovered that his subject matter is not this or that particular truth, but truth as such. He is concerned with "that truth which is the origin of all truth, to wit that which pertains to the first principle of the being of things." He has discovered that there is mystery at the heart of reality, and not only mystery which for the moment—owing to inadequate experiment and experience—escapes our comprehension, but that the very being of the universe is a mystery which Man, finite as he is, cannot resolve. He can prove that it has a First Cause, that God is; but unaided he can say nothing in proper terms of the inner nature of that Infinite Being. He can give no intrinsic description of God's being, nor can he define the divine essence. The infinite must always exceed the finite.

As a Catholic, however, he believes by faith that the one true God has revealed to Man truths about Himself which totally exceed the capacity of Man's reason—or that of any other finite intelligence—to discover; and he believes that these truths, as expressed by the Church in dogmatic form, are true. It is quite clear that when the revealed truth is of such a nature that its content is unattainable by unaided reason, authority is supreme, since the truth is only known as revealed by authority. This raises no difficulty for the philosopher whose only authority is the true, since the dogmatic truth in question is revealed by the authority of Truth. We accept a rationally attainable truth because it is seen by the reason to be objectively true. We accept a supernatural truth because it is revealed to us as true by the

God Who is Truth itself; such truths as the central mysteries of the Christian revelation—the Trinity and the Incarnation. It follows from what has been said that these truths are not irrational but suprarational, and as such can be accepted by reason fortified by faith. Again, as self-revelation concerning the Godhead and Its creative purpose, they cannot in any way contradict those naturally knowable truths which are concerned with the natural creation of the selfsame God. Our analysis of created reality does not lead to the discovery of truth which is contradictory to a supernatural truth—both are the work of, and as it were mirror, the one God. Apparent contradictions can be shown to result from a loose use of terms or a misunderstanding of theological language. The truths of Faith and naturally known truths can, then, be considered as existing on two levels, not the one superimposed on the other, but rather as diversified in depth and in vision. By revelation we are given a glimpse of the depths which lie beyond any finite understanding. By philosophy we see, but only the outer fringes of ultimate Reality.

Some truths which are contained in divine revelation are of their nature discoverable by reason. We shall return later to the particular difficulty which this raises, first discussing two great "uses" which philosophy can have for a Catholic student.

#### PHILOSOPHY AND APOLOGETICS

First. In God's providence, not all men have received the gift of faith. It is therefore necessary for a Catholic to be able to express his faith in clear unequivocal language, and this will involve the use of philosophic terms. He will also be required to defend his faith against misunderstanding, and against the attacks of those whose philosophy or world view rejects God, or who have not yet seen that the "particular" principle they postulate is an insufficient explanation of reality without reference to the First Principle—the Supreme Being we call God.

The attack will frequently be on the rational level, based on philosophic reasons. It is possible for a man to prostitute his sense of awe in the face of mystery, in the service of a "divinised" culture, or some other man-made god. The Catholic student should be able to attempt to show him the particularity of his thought, then leaving him to see the mystery of reality and life as a whole demanding explanation. He must be made to see that it is not just one part of life which demands explanation, but all life and all reality. He must not be left to take refuge in a man-made god, or a fatalism based on natural forces. Usually, however, the attack will come from someone who has an inadequate conception of a universal principle or cause, and who often has at the same time a radical misconception regarding the nature of God. It is then vitally necessary for apologetic

reasons, that the Catholic student should have a strong and vigorous philosophy, a philosophy which depends on no ipse dixit, but which is seen as demanded by the very nature of things—a true and firmly established philosophy of Being.

This philosophy will also, acting as the handmaid of theology, provide a clear and reliable terminology which can be used as a medium through which the revealed doctrines of the Faith can be expressed. To take an example: both for our own sakes and the sake of others it is imperative that we should be able to express clearly what we mean—in so far as it is possible for a finite creature to do so—when we say that in Jesus Christ there are two natures in one person. To do this, we must know what a "nature" is, and have at least some idea of what "person" means. We must know the sense of the Church's definition, and be able to explain it in terms which will remove the difficulties and misconceptions of opponents. Supernatural truth cannot, of course, be demonstrated, but it is possible to show what it is not, and to remove objections based on apparent contradictions. All this is conditioned by the fact that Man is rational, and as such rightly demands that his reason be satisfied. The Church does not ask for the assent of part of man, but demands that a man should look at the evidence of credibility and with his whole being, as a rational being, freely assent to the Truth.

The difficulty deferred above must now be discussed, namely, that the Church seems to teach dogmatically certain propositions which can be concluded to by natural reason. This is in fact the case. She does not teach them, however, precisely as reached by philosophy but only in so far as they form part of the revelation made by God as being necessary for the salvation of the faithful. And although she states them dogmatically as truths which must be held, she does not dogmatise about the precise chain of arguments which will lead to them<sup>2</sup>. If we consider for a moment how easy it is for our reason to be deluded by prejudice or passion, how few people have the time, the will, or even the aptitude for philosophic study in the strict sense, we can see that it is part of God's loving providence that these truths should not only be accessible and certain for the wise and learned, but should also be given to the simplest peasants or child.

#### PHILOSOPHY IN ITSELF

The second use of philosophy springs from its very nature: its use as a discipline which in its own order attains Truth. On

<sup>2</sup> Thus the Vatican Council declared that the fact of God's existence can be demonstrated from the things He had made, but did not declare dogmatically that it was demonstrated in S. Thomas's "Five Ways".

the natural level, as well as on the supernatural, we require a "catholic" outlook. It is true that our final hope is not in philosophy, but that does not mean that philosophy has not its part to play in the life of the Catholic student. There are many aspects of reality about which revelation gives us no information. But God so leads each of us that the maximum is required, with regard to our circumstances and opportunities; a full service is the only service that love recognises. The Catholic student, therefore, who is given the opportunity of developing his reason, has the obligation of using it in such a way that his natural vision shall correspond to his supernatural one. He cannot allow his reason to become secularised or sectarian. Philosophy alone will develop his fullest powers, and it alone can save him from a particularism in his thought which, carried to its conclusion, will ultimately come into conflict with his faith. Reason must be used in the complete service of God. That means that the student will use it to discover how all things point to God as their principle. And by reason of the universality of view which philosophy gives to a man, his mind will become more open to the action of God's grace. As he penetrates more deeply into the mystery of the real and of Being as revealed in philosophy, he will discover that the last great "things" of the philosopher—the Why of evil, of suffering, and even of creation—point beyond themselves. In this sense philosophy will show that his soul in its love and desire for the true is "naturally Christian"; and in his discovery of the mystery of reality and Being, and his recognition of the tiny area of light which his finite powers give at their best, he will have discovered one of the roads which lead, with God's help, to the foot of the Cross, where God answers all Man's questions and fears.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

It has been said that the depth of Baron von Hugel's thought was due largely to restrictions on reading, imposed by his doctor. He was forced, instead of reading about things, to think about them. It is thinking, not reading, which makes a philosopher; which is probably why St. Thomas Aquinas advised a student to have only one book at a time, and to give all his attention to understanding that. The following bibliography may seem at first sight small, but if all the books recommended are to be thought about they will occupy attention, in the first reading of them, for several years; and will give a considerable acquaintance with the main questions of philosophy and the doctrines with which these questions are met by Scholastic philosophy. At the same time they will give not only ample knowledge of scholastic terminology but also an adequate acquaintance with that generally current in other philosophical circles.