

COMMON SENSE IN PHILOSOPHY

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COMPARATIVELY recent inquiry among present-day thinkers,¹ relative to Neo-Scholastic Philosophy, netted many replies whose comments and criticism are of interest to students of Scholastic Philosophy.

In criticism of Scholastic Philosophy it is said that "the Scholastic method seems too rationalistic, aprioristic, deductive, to an age whose temper is empirical, experimental, hypothetical. Its great defect is thought to be its independence of experience. It appears as if Scholastics were trying 'to spin truth out of their own interior.'"² Were it not for a contrary opinion, this objection would be formidable, for no philosophy to be complete can afford the neglect of knowledge gained from singular facts. This contrary opinion states that "idealists dislike the strong realistic bias of Scholastic thought."³ Here we have two opposing systems, two extremes, each one of which accuses Scholastic Philosophy of the tendencies characteristic of its rival. And yet Scholastic Philosophy is the Philosophy termed by one of its adherents the *common sense* philosophy!

It is our purpose to sketch the fundamental notion of this philosophy in the cold, hard light of common sense. Philosophy is strictly and logically defined: the knowledge of things through their ultimate causes which is attainable by the natural light of reason. This definition has been translated as "organized and supreme common sense."⁴ Common sense as we take it here, means two things: first, *good sense*, i. e., the plain view and certitude of the plain man-in-the-street; second, *Common consent*,⁵ i. e., the unwavering assent and firm conviction of the majority of mankind.

The ordinary man has definite notions regarding knowledge. The three preparatory fundamentals; namely, the principle of contradic-

¹ J. S. Zyburá, *Present Day Thinkers and the New Scholasticism* (St. Louis, 1926).

² Zyburá, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

³ Zyburá, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

⁴ V. McNabb, O. P., *The Catholic Church and Philosophy* (New York, 1927), p. 1.

⁵ McNabb, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

tion, the fact of personal existence, the capability of knowledge, are his by instinct. He knows intuitively that a thing cannot be alive and at the same time be dead; deny his own personal existence and you insult him; tell him he is not capable of knowing anything and you have but repeated your previous error. These intuitions are basic. The philosopher knows them under the titles of the first principle, the first fact, and the first condition. They are necessary admissions, unprovable statements for any philosopher, despite the easy assumption of many modern philosophers that the advent of Descartes revolutionized the necessity of such hypotheses. Descartes' famous dictum "*Cogito, ergo sum*" is captious; even the veriest tyro in logic will reject as fallacious any premiss that supposes the conclusion to be deduced from that premiss. Scholastic Philosophy holds logic in high esteem; the three fundamentals remain, in her eyes, necessary admissions, unprovable statements. No philosophy reveals them. Without them, not only is there no philosophy, there cannot even be chaos. To obtain them, we have recourse to the intuition of the normal man.

Of the normal man's objectivity of knowledge it might be said with Shakespeare, "The world's mine oyster, which I with sword will open . . ." For him to whom his own proper existence is so patent, the acceptance of other realities causes no qualms. Flights of futile imagination are anathema to common sense. The ordinary normal man is not a sympathetic audience for those who attempt to explain away what he knows to be everyday actualities. Wind him about with the interminable threads of sophistry, lethargize his mind by technical terminology to support your theory of no reality outside the subject. He would admit your theory only to refute you. The next moment he will be acting in concordance with his own and everyman's firmly entrenched intuition—the reality of things outside himself. "Philosophy's first duty is to justify man's intuitions."⁶ And this office Scholastic Philosophy carries out faithfully and all in the light of common sense. Various theories, new and old, are criticized and rejected because of the absurdities they entail, and common sense never tolerates the absurd.

Commenting on the relations between the Catholic Church and Philosophy, the learned Dominican, Father Vincent McNabb, claims that "the medieval Catholic philosopher's chief aim was to justify the intuitions of the normal man. His principle of investigation was the valid, normal principle of *causality*."⁷

⁶ McNabb, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁷ McNabb, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

This intuition of the principle of causality is primitive. Even in this day of enlightenment, when antiquated notions are *ipso facto* the hall-mark of ignorance in the eyes of the so-called intelligensia, universal man still is born, lives and dies in response to one or another of three important sentinel questions — *Who? What? Why?* These are ubiquitous highwaymen along life's path. They spring up in inquisitive childhood; they remain in querulous old age. Every moment of life, every act and thought is an echo of the resounding word *because*.

"It was Greek philosophic genius"—the foundation of Catholic philosophy—"at its best which analysed the normal man's intuitions on causality into the four causes:—two external (Efficient Cause, Final Cause), two internal (Formal Cause, Material Cause)."⁸ Let us examine this four-fold causality in relation to common sense.

We say that a material cause is *that from which a thing is made*. So houses are made of stone, of wood, of steel. Should you ask the normal man why this particular house is called a stone house, his only answer will be that it is made of stone. Should you inquire again and ask him why should a stone house necessarily be made of stone, he would either suspect the state of your mind or suspect that he was being made the butt of some joke.

For the normal man, a house is not just a pile of bricks or a load of lumber. His common sense tells him that over and above the bricks and lumber there is a certain form which goes to make up for him the complete notion of a house. This form is a cause of the house not only for him, but for the philosopher, who names it the *formal* cause and defines it as *that which gives a thing its form*—or perhaps in a more intelligible term,—its *nature*. The ordinary man would never say that peaches and pickles are the same thing except in the matter of taste. He knows that underlying taste, there must be some principle that determines the nature of those things, that differentiates them one from the other, and makes it possible and even necessary that these two substances have such a divergency in taste.

And now let us go back to our house of stone and wood. The normal man never expects a pile of stones and a load of lumber to turn into a house of themselves. He knows that somebody has to make the house; in other words, he is familiar with that cause which we call the *efficient* cause and define simply as *that by which something is made*. Efficiency for him is the goal of daily routine. It may connote nowadays an added sense of *well done*, but primarily he understands it as

⁸ McNabb, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

getting things done. We may take another example,—a carpenter sawing wood. The carpenter knows that the saw will not of itself begin to operate, that he or some one else must first apply it. He knows that he may lay it aside at any time without any danger that the saw of itself will continue to work; in other words, he understands that he is the *principal* efficient cause in sawing the wood, and that the saw is only a secondary efficient cause, an *instrumental* cause, one that works only under the influence and directive supervision of the principal cause. That the saw itself is an efficient cause is quite evident to the carpenter. He would never think of using a hammer to saw wood. He recognizes that inherent in the very nature of the saw is a certain quality, an aptitude or disposition that, placed in operation by, and under the influence of the principal cause, serves readily in producing some desired effect. Examples of efficient and instrumental causality may be multiplied endlessly. It is upon them that the whole material side of life is based, and at no time has the application of these principles been so popular, so diffuse, as in our own day. At a time when so many of the modern philosophers are seeking to undermine the validity of causality, it is worthy of note, that men are estimating the extent of scientific and industrial progress as proportionate to the application of the normal man's principle of *cause and effect*.

Whenever men act, they act for some purpose. Purpose they understand as the end in view, the object to be attained. The philosopher says the *final* cause is *that on account of which something is done*. For him it is the principle cause, the prime mover and cause of the others. This notion of a final cause dominates every man's life. No admission humbles and shames a man quite so much as the admission that he does not know the reason why he did a certain thing. It is a confession of the lack of "good-sense." The ordinary man links together every act with some end, proximate or remote, and it is this end that is the motivating power, the whole reason why he acts at all. The shiftless man and the man of no purpose are identical. The men who do things are those who have set before their minds something they desire and must obtain.

The normal man's appreciation of causality is intuitive. It may be inquired whether or not common sense appreciates the philosopher's final objective,—the *ultimate* causes, the solution of all facts not into their proximate but into their supreme principles. The answer is evident. All men hope for final beatitude. They may err in determining its nature, but for each one of them, it represents the ultimate. The scientists engaged in various fields are all occupied in seeking the ultimate. Chemists and cosmologists are making exhaustive efforts

to reduce the inanimate universe into its ultimate component parts; botanists, zoologists and anthropologists are continually puzzling over the ultimate, sufficient causes for the origin of life.

Apprehension of the ultimate is had by the natural light of reason, at least in regard to its existence and some of its qualities, though the exact comprehension of its nature may escape the scope of reason. Reason is the medium of procedure common alike to the normal man and the philosopher. To reason is to philosophize; common sense is intuitive reasoning. Their difference consists only in the degree of penetration and intensity.

Thus it is that the definition of philosophy given in the beginning is paralleled by *supreme, organized common sense*. Common sense tells the normal man that he has knowledge, that he has the knowledge of things, that he knows them by means of the ordinary causes in the natural light of reason. Common sense is the groundwork, the foundation of philosophy; philosophy the vindication and glorification of common sense. Truly we do not claim that common sense is the supreme criterion of all truth. We would not make it the supreme court of validity, but it can be asserted with safety that in regard to its own proper object, *viz.*, "certain obvious truths necessary for human life,"⁹ common sense is a sure, safe criterion of truth. It is often concerned with truths objectively evident, and then it approaches the status of a supreme criterion. In the words of Bossuet: "*Le sentiment du genre humain est considere comme la voix de toute la nature, et par consequent, en quelque facon, comme celle de Dieu: c'est pour-quoi la preuve est invincible; . . .*"¹⁰ Common sense has erred, certainly, but only when it has wandered outside its own proper domain. In the days of Columbus, it was the verdict of common sense that the earth was flat, but to paraphrase Chesterton, though the normal man may have denied the highly disputable sphericity of the earth, he never denied the indisputable earth. In other words, the fact that the earth was round was not a truth necessary for human life. The normal man's mind was not thrown into a state of chaos which would happen should anyone state to him, as fact, the non-existence of the earth.

Common sense is a natural gift, common to all men, though more prominent in one man than in another. He who rejects an intuition common to all mankind in favor of some hybrid proposition, cannot hope to convince the great body of mankind of the truth of his state-

⁹ E. Hugon, O. P., *Logica* (Paris, 1916), p. 350.

¹⁰ Bossuet, *Logique*, liv. III, c. xxii.

ment. He has placed himself "beyond the pale." To paraphrase Father McNabb, "for something which the normal man can understand but not explain, he substitutes something which the normal man can neither explain nor understand."¹¹

"When we have defined philosophy as organized, supreme common sense, we have not discredited but further accredited common sense."¹² Would it not be fitting to invert the statement so that in defining philosophy as organized, supreme common sense, we have not discredited but further accredited philosophy? "If the few who think, or who think they think, find themselves in opposition to the many on plain matters of fact, it is not the many, but the few, who must mend their thinking, for Philosophy's first duty is to justify the intuitions of mankind."¹³

¹¹ McNabb, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

¹² McNabb, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

¹³ McNabb, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

