

A Thomist for Our Time

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The figure of Désiré Cardinal Mercier (1851-1926) has always been rather vague and shadowy, obscured almost in the mist of faint suspicion and mistrust which so often enveloped those whose Thomism is supported only by their own personal conviction. For several decades Mercier, founder of the Institut Supérieur de Philosophie at Louvain, had no peer among the more progressive members of the school of St. Thomas. No one more than he has formulated in a sharp and decisive manner what the contemporary task of the Thomist must be.

Tradition and Progress

Mercier knew, in the first place, that he was part of a tradition. Philosophy is an affair of personal research and discovery, but it does not require one to make a clean slate of the past and begin from scratch. Rootless innovation is out of the question in the arts and sciences as much as in practical life. The present grows out of the past, and without it it would not be what it is. Thomists take this as axiomatic, but to the modern mind it is far from congenial. In deploring this loss of the sense of tradition, T. S. Eliot touched a vital nerve. To Mercier it was clear that if all previous speculation had to be discarded as vain and futile, there would be no point in continuing the intellectual quest.

But must we accept the past indiscriminately? No, this is not possible either, for philosophers have disagreed about essential points. Neither philosophers nor historical periods are equally estimable; one's only recourse is to choose judiciously, to have preferences and to exercise them unashamedly. Mercier declares:

when, after an examination, one is unshaken in the conviction that a certain position represents the most successful solution of the principal problems of the mind, one's duty is to assent to that position, under pain of betraying the truth.¹

It was in this spirit that Mercier viewed his own work in the medieval doctrine of the scholastics. Mercier made his choice on conviction, not blindly. He was, quite simply, won over by the truth. There is no

question of "enslaving our thinking to a master, even if the master be St. Thomas Aquinas."²²

The issue bears closer inspection. On what conditions and in what sense can one call oneself the disciple of a philosopher? The late nineteenth century Thomistic revival posed the problem, in the first place, of its very possibility. Can one really borrow ideas from another age, one of positive construction, to serve in a revolutionary era, simply transferring them without further ado from one century to another? Mercier thought not. If one does decide to "follow" St. Thomas, it cannot be a case of going *back* in any sense. The reason is that "philosophy itself is not a *fait accompli*; it is as living as the mind which conceives it."²³ The only way of truly taking possession of a philosophical heritage is to reconquer it and not surrender to it passively. A philosophical tradition or school can survive and go on only if it is renewed and rejuvenated in each successive generation. That is why, as Mercier saw it, a Thomist can only be a neo-Thomist—and it should be noted that the term, so repugnant to some, originally meant just this. It is an honorable title and is undeserving of most of the abuse and obloquy which have been heaped upon it. Mercier's effort was to drive home to Thomists this one lesson, that in fact philosophical knowledge can only be the fruit of a personal activity.

Thomism: Historical or Perennial?

Since philosophical work is a human enterprise, it must be time-bound and bear the stamp of historicity which is the hallmark of man's nature. It was no part of Mercier's vocation to transform Thomism into a relativism or historicism. The philosopher, unlike the scientist, is necessarily interested in the past history of his field of inquiry. Disagreement among philosophers is evident enough, but it suggests at least that they do not simply ignore one another. That so many pretend to do so in our day—a Cartesian legacy—is as curious as it is perverse. The writings of philosophers are, more commonly, full of historical references. If only to depart from the position of others, philosophers have to think in the historical perspective and insert themselves quite naturally into the currents of thought. This insertion into a temporal mainstream would seem to be the essential condition of, rather than an obstacle to, the quest of timeless truth.

As he reflected on the data of intellectual history, Mercier was impressed by the development across the ages of a *philosophia perennis*.

This was not the systematic synthesis of a monolithic body of doctrine but rather a continuing and coherent conversation between the great philosophers. Their views diverged but they were eager to submit them to critical appraisal, to be heard by others and, if possible, to be understood. The dialogue is drawn out over the centuries and has not been sterile or barren. New voices are heard and are listened to by those who want to put themselves abreast of current ideas. Participants in these periodic exchanges are unequal in their abilities and in the attention they command. The Thomist awards the palm to St. Thomas only after mature reflection, and he is not obliged to call every other thinker bad in order to call this one the best. His intention is to seek inspiration in the principles and method of the Angelic Doctor and to orientate his personal effort in the direction indicated by the example of his master.

Devotion to St. Thomas does not imply that the time of philosophical discovery and progress closed with the death of the Angelic Doctor. The school of St. Thomas has not the right, much less the duty, to ignore currents of non-Thomistic thought or of the thought of its contemporaries. The Thomist's sense of tradition secures for him a remarkable firmness and solidity of thinking and a feeling of confidence not to be despised. But, following St. Thomas' own example, he may never close his mind or unduly narrow his vision.

The Philosopher's Dialogue

The Thomist realizes that every negation rests ultimately on an affirmation and that every doubt implies a prior certitude. Every error, moreover, contains a grain of truth. This is Mercier's justification for studying those with whom he could disagree, and for doing so attentively and even sympathetically. His freedom of spirit was expressed magnificently in the statement:

. . . we claim for ourselves Plato, Descartes, Leibniz, Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Wundt, as fully perhaps and with a determination as sincere as those who regard us as a party in opposition to them; we may differ from them, but our zeal in no way precludes the study of a man merely because of the date of his birth.⁴

The gentle "dig" in the closing remark should not be missed: it works both ways.

The Thomist should be as much interested in contemporary philosophers as he is in those of the past. Any philosopher who is out of

touch with actual currents of thought and who, as he thinks, immunizes himself from their influence, is as good as dead so far as the life of his time is concerned. He contributes as little as he receives, is neither nourished nor stimulated to significant growth. The shell in which he encases himself hardens, and his thinking assumes the properties of a strange and extinct species. In a fine phrase Mercier declares that the neo-Thomist must act where he lives, in the society of his fellows. "Why do we philosophize," he asks, "if not for our contemporaries?" The philosopher's dialogue should be with his own contemporaries and should be conducted without either bravado or faintheartedness. The motive can only be respect for truth and a fraternal charity, in a sincere spirit of cooperation.

Medieval and Modern Thomism

In a conference in 1908, when he had become Archbishop of Malines, Mercier revealed that he had been asked more than once to describe briefly what neo-Thomism was and how it differed, if at all, from medieval Thomism as well as from modern philosophy. He confessed that he found this an impossible assignment and thought it would be a mistake to try to comply with the request. There is some justification in requiring a student to familiarize himself with the principal conclusions reached in Thomism and to set them forth in manageable theses or arguments. For one thing, the student will be examined on this sort of historical or positive information (not without significance does Mercier use this term). These compressed and neatly packaged formulae may also be made available to the general reading public. But this is emphatically not the essential or most significant work of the Thomistic school. It represents the level or intensity of understanding which Thomistic philosophy has attained thus far, and as such it is not without meaning or value. But if philosophy is a form of life—the life of the mind—it must continue to grow, to mature, to surpass itself.

Mercier determined to erase the image of Thomism as an ensemble of theses, solidly articulated and formulated with excessive precision and clarity. One's estimate of this image will depend to some extent on his own background and education and on his specific interests. These are, strictly speaking, both extrinsic and accidental criteria of evaluation. The work of systematization has its limitations and even risks which have been rightly pointed out. Yet this work is both

legitimate and, for certain purposes, necessary. All scientific research is for the sake of building up an established body of truth; otherwise the activity would be deprived of its natural goal and incentive—an intolerable impoverishment, stigmatized by Aristotle but championed by adherents of relativism, skepticism, dilettantism, and non-commitment. Similarly, the activity peculiar to philosophical thinking and reflection tends spontaneously toward systematic construction. It is no good deploring a perfectly understandable, if ambiguous, eventuality. A system can be grasped as such only when it is seen as an end product, not a ready-made entity and still less an original expression of immediate contact with reality.

Pure Objectivity in Philosophy?

Even the most rabid objectivist is aware that the human mind is limited. His trouble may be that he has been victimized by his own intellectual development, consciously and unconsciously. His notion of what knowledge is has been derived from a fantastic and perversely un-Thomistic presentation. Knower and known (“mind” and “thing”) are hypostasized and set over against each other, and the trick is somehow to get the one inside the other without disturbing anything. That the object is not altered in the process appears quite obvious; what is carelessly overlooked is that *object* is not simply identical with *reality*. What seems equally obvious in this presentation, although contrary to fact, is that the subject succeeds in knowing the object only to the extent that he remains purely passive and allows himself simply to receive an impression. Any contribution on his part to the moment of initial reception is counted as interference and a threat to “objectivity.”

This description does account for one undeniable aspect of the knowing process. Up to a point it serves as a plausible theory, because it corresponds to certain facts of experience and is hung together on what seems to be a conscientious introspective analysis. There is a lesson here which has wider application in the history of Thomism. The insufficiency of the above presentation was not fully recognized by Thomists until certain difficulties were raised during and after the seventeenth century. These problems could neither be met and resolved by the prevailing version of Thomistic gnoseology (as was attempted at first) nor dismissed as fatuous and artificially contrived (this task was taken later by those who tried to discredit the modern

epistemological problem as a false issue). The episode has had a good end insofar as it has brought Thomists, more perspicacious than some of their colleagues, to re-think and re-examine their own position. The elements for a solution to the modern problem of knowledge were discovered to be present in the genuine doctrine of St. Thomas, some of whose cardinal insights had been slighted or imperfectly understood.

Mercier's Lesson

Mercier's charter for a reinvigorated, forward-looking Thomism was so right that it won the approval of most of the leading Thomistic centers in various countries. In practically a quarter-century, especially in the eyes of those outside the school, Thomism became synonymous with Mercier's "neo-Thomism." Not that all Thomists concurred; there was no reason why all the disciples of St. Thomas should have subscribed unreservedly to all the planks in Mercier's platform. The rejuvenated school of St. Thomas has never presented the appearance of an unbroken, homogeneous front. But in the sturdy and healthy form evident in the work of Mercier and others, neo-Thomism has observed a fidelity to St. Thomas as uncompromising as that of any "conservative" and, on the whole, more clear-sighted. It was this fidelity which inspired Mercier's effort to renew Thomistic thought by responding to the legitimate demands of the intellectual life and searching for the laws of sound Thomistic development. In some respects Mercier was a pioneer; he entered the scene almost from the earliest decades of the great Thomistic revival launched under Pope Leo XIII. Mercier was a Thomist for our time not only, or even so much, by what he taught, but also by the example he set of a twentieth century man pursuing truth in and for the company of his fellows.

NOTES

- 1 "La philosophie néo-scholastique," *Revue néo-scholastique*, I (1894), 14.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 3 "Le bilan philosophique du XIX siècle," *ibid.*, VII (1900), 320.
- 4 "La philosophie néo-scholastique," *ibid.*, I (1894), 14.