

A VISION OF ORDER

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"How exquisite the irony! Sputnik still travels its orbit around the place where Earth was—now deserted. Tiny symbol of man's intelligence, circling the void which man has chosen in his madness. . . ."

—*Memoirs of an Archangel*, 2001 A.D.

WOULD IT BE IMPERTINENT to say: the world is in a muddle! Would it be pessimistic? A contemporary voice has called the temper of the time a "distraction from distraction by distraction." Perhaps a better word is *disorder*—in every sphere, but especially in thought. And this is just now crucial. For thought bears action. And, by the sheer circumstance of present technological strides, man possesses the instruments of his own destruction. He is walking a tightrope of annihilation. One giddy step and . . . the consequence is rather sobering.

Diagnosis: Disorders in contemporary thought are legion. But the main offenders in the West are perhaps Communism, Existentialism, and Naturalism.¹ Outside the ambit of essentially Christian ideas, men fall more or less into one of these three currents of thought, consciously or unconsciously: by the cast of their minds, by the ideals of their aspirations, by the action of their lives.

Introduction: These "isms" are no strangers to us. Nor is it a novel suggestion that they leave a wake of confusion in the minds of their adepts. They begin and they end in disorder. Why? Because the fabric of a man's philosophical *Anschauung* is woven from the threads of daily experiential contact with reality. Now, reality as seen through the crooked lenses of Marx, Sartre, or Dewey is a distortion. One sees the world as a war between atoms; another as the void of non-being; the third as a maze of facts.

The Communist: This is he who looks out into the world of spinning atoms and misses the order of their atomic structure. With an imaginative solution worthy of the Greeks (and, in fact, "borrowed" from them) he sees, not the battle of the frogs and mice, but the battle of the atoms. "Matter is in constant motion," he muses, "and it's positively *dialectical*." As my mind is a scramble of possibilities, when searching the answer to a problem, as I weigh now one, now another in the battle for truth, as I become mentally a delicate interplay of point and counterpoint issuing in eventual solution: so this dialectical process of the mind is mirrored in a universal fray—atom vs. atom, brute vs. brute, tribe vs. tribe, action-reaction, capitalism-communism, thesis-antithesis, *evolving* into a new synthesis.

The Existentialist: This philosopher wears a long face, for his outlook is drear. With him, we are back to the *tohu-bohu* of Genesis, back to the seething primeval chaos—except that the spirit of God will never breathe order and design into it. For the atheistic type of existentialist, God does not exist. No God, no planning Mind, no divine Artisan conceiving within Himself the ideas, the essences of things, and executing them in a work of creation. Nothing left but mere vacuity. Life for the Existentialist is a formless batter to be beaten into some shape by man's frenzied efforts at self-realization. Only in operation is there salvation. Only in action is there meaning. Only in the daily agony of "engagement" is there escape from the suffocating toils of shapelessness, the enigma of non-being. The result is inevitable: despair, frustration, anxiety to arrive at being something definite. But, as Lewis Carroll might say, "If one starts from nowhere, though intending to get somewhere, one won't get very much of anywhere!"

The Naturalist: Philosophers of this stamp conjure up images of the specimen-collector of flora and fauna, or the Babbitt type businessman: seeing only the facts, respecting only the facts, demanding only the facts. For the Naturalist sees no further than the itemized file on his desk. A glance at the universe reveals to him no more than a teeming mass of particulars. Far from seeing beyond the fact to something above it, he sees none but the most superficial relations between fact and fact. He is convinced that the supernatural is myth and bogus: a pleasant pipe-dream which cannot stand up under the acid test of micro- stetho- or telescope. He is religiously pledged to the "values" of *humanity* and *progress*. (Strange generalizations for a man of his concrete tastes, one reflects.) Convinced that the salvation of mankind lies in a passionate devotion to the scientific method, the Naturalist hopes that future generations may straddle and cata-

logue this universe of facts. For the present, he remains in the labyrinth, avidly clutching fact after fact. And again a voice intones:

"Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?"

The common error: These, then, are the ideas currently determining the action of many. Their common error is to have overlooked the obvious, or to have "had the experience but missed the meaning," in the words of T. S. Eliot. Although there is a message written all over the face of creation, their myopic vision has not deciphered it. They have not proceeded with St. Paul from the *visibilia* of this world to the *invisibilia* beyond. They have been looking at the facts, instead of *through* the facts. Communism and Naturalism, because that is all they see. Existentialism, because with a cavalier sweep of the eraser it has cancelled from the blackboard of reality the Prime Postulate, the ultra-factual Fact.

A realistic approach: To avoid the real is idealistic; to miss it is gross negligence. To distort it is a lie. If we are to preserve our mental sanity, there is need today of a profoundly realistic philosophy: one grounded on a true and undistorted interpretation of reality. But what will a penetrating glance at the world reveal? A fact beyond the facts: *order*—and its inevitable explanation: *intelligence*.

The fact beyond the facts—order: Man cannot study intently the phenomena of reality without sooner or later experiencing a vision of order.² Things are inter-related: as similar to dissimilar, cause to effect, etc. A vast network of relations connects things, and not merely on one, but on many different levels. About the easiest way to become experientially conscious of this is to upset the equilibrium. On the physical level, throw a stone up. It will come down by dint of some invisible law. On the moral level, injure society by an intrusion upon the common good. Short-change your tax collector, for example, or snub your draft board. You will soon pay the penalty of society's outraged rights.

The consequence of order: Order is not mere succession. It is defined as "the relation of one to another according to prior and posterior." It signifies not just one thing *after* another, but one *from* another (material); *according to* another (plan, exemplar, design); *by* another (agent); *for* another (purpose, end.) Order implies the relation of cause to effect: an agent working in some material, for a certain end, and according to a plan. Order, ultimately, implies intelligence.

The order of natural things. A. Natural Philosophy: With this in mind, we cannot focus our attention upon the various levels of reality for long without beginning to lisp out their meaning. But let us explore in somewhat more detail—say, the order of natural things. This is the realm of the Natural Philosopher. He it is who is intrigued by the mystery of motion, the ebb and flow, the constant flux: motion from one place to another, change from one quality to another, the cycle of generation and corruption. His task is to explain this phenomenon. What is this vesture worn by all visible realities?

His answer is that motion is a half-way state between imperfection and perfection. It is an actual tendency of a body toward a perfection not yet had, from the state of imperfection originally had. This may not impress us. And even the precise definition of motion as “the act of a being in potency, insofar as it is in potency” may not seem much of a contribution. Actually it is world-shaking. For it points the finger of undeniable, factual evidence to an original *source* for this motion, this passing from imperfection to perfection. It demands an explanation of a communicated perfection, encountered in all moving bodies, yet accounted for by none of them. In philosophy’s terse language:

Manifestly some things are moved in the world.
But everything moved, is moved by another.
But there cannot be an infinity of moved movers.
Therefore: It is necessary to arrive at some
Prime Mover, which is unmoved.³

Precisely here lies the answer that can counteract communistic principles. Yes, matter *is* in motion. But not of itself. A communist may not admit that the Prime Mover is God, but he cannot deny its causality. Nor can he continue to call matter “dialectical.” The universe is not a horror of mutual antagonism and struggle-to-the-death. It is a symphony of order and design. No need to catalogue the regularity of seasons, dependability of the heavenly bodies, or annual marvel of animal migrations. The universe confesses its own order. But this is the trademark of one thing: *mind* and *intelligence*. Once again we work from the facts of experience back to the sole explanation—from order back to an ordering Mind.

B. Metaphysics: Nature’s deepest secret, though prodded by the Natural Philosopher, as yet remains unexposed to view. When he has been fascinated by the cosmos in motion; when he has turned within to explore the intricacies of his own soul; then he reverts to the universe in a sweeping gaze vast enough to embrace everything

that *is*. And his wonder is awakened by the phenomenon of *being*: everything that is vibrant with existence. *Being*—the common denominator, possessing which, all things may rub shoulders. The apple, the field mouse, de Pompadour's wig—all *are*. This is the *ne plus ultra*. Possibilities may be interesting, but they either "is" or they "ain't." Existence may be accidental to a thing, but it is the bare minimum for actuality—a rather momentous minimum.

This vision of being opens up exciting horizons. If man can know a common attribute of absolutely everything that exists, ever did, or ever will, then his power of knowing is somehow *infinite* True, for this universality of vision, man must pay the price of partial obscurity. He does not grasp the concept of being with the precision, say, of soft leather, a drifting cloud, or the postman crunching up the gravel path—more concrete, sensibly grasped realities. But the idea, "being," like the recurring glints of a shimmering diamond, constantly reveals new riches, implicitly contained, but heretofore embedded in the obscurity of its very brilliance. These qualities concomitant with whatever has some mite of being are, of course, what are commonly called the transcendentals, i.e., things of such universal application as: truth, goodness, beauty, etc.

Man's peculiar *mode* of knowing such things as "being" is rooted in his ability to grasp *analogies*: those proportionate similarities of otherwise dissimilar things.⁴ This capacity is the hallmark of genius according to Aristotle. It is also the stumbling block of the literal-minded and pedantic, as the 14th century so vividly demonstrates. One main cause of the Scholastic decline was Occam's Nominalism: an insistence that such universal, analogical concepts as "being" are mere words and not reality. The consequence of this lamentable error was a dismissal of any analogous knowledge of reality. Occam's razor severed man's toehold on the infinite.

Analogy is really the key that opens the door of philosophical speculation. Fitted by nature to know most properly the sensible, material realities surrounding him, man can only rise above this level (to his own spiritual soul, an angel, or God) or probe below (into the murky mists of prime matter underlying all mundane reality) by such a tool as analogy—his "third eye" which sees more of reality, but blurs with super-vision. Those who would foreswear this tool, must circle the sodden trenches of the factual. Unhappy ones! Never to soar aloft on the wings of an inspired poetry or metaphysic. But those who have had the vision of order, who have not denied the sudden visitation of being, can travel the life-line of analogy back to the very source of being, the cause of their common legacy. They

can, by an unshatterable chain of rational argument, reach out and touch the Supreme Being. Analogy has led them home.

The Christian recognizes this First Being as God. Reasoning further, he proclaims the First Being to contain all the richness and perfection of infinite being. Other things are seen as mere *participations* of the absolute being which is God's. The essences of created realities are reflections of the Divine Essence, which is imitable in infinite ways. Thus, the Christian can face the world with a certainty unknown to the Existentialist anxiously facing the void.

Thomism: The burden of this essay has been to point up the need of a realistic philosophy today. Such is Thomism: that body of doctrine, that unique spirit to be found in the various writings of St. Thomas Aquinas. Grounded upon the sturdy realism of Aristotle, it stands midway between the idealism of Plato, Aristotle's master, and the comparative materialism of the pre-Socratics. The doctrine speaks for itself. The history of philosophy seconds that voice. But the most reassuring voice of Catholics is the majestic proclamation of Peter, "*Ite ad Thomam*." As Pius XI has said:

"In order to avoid the *errors* which are the primary cause of all the miseries of our time, it is necessary now, as never before, to hold fast to the teachings of St. Thomas" (*Studiorum Ducem*).

Accent on the accidental: Philosophy's values are eternal and immutable. As the noblest of purely human pursuits, it was called "divine" by Aristotle, whose giant intellect stood captive in humble, childlike wonderment before a discipline, enabling him to reach, however faintly, the ultimate cause of all. And what of us?

Our generation does not need a mystical Pseudo-Denys to sing the twilight beauties of the *via negativa*; nor an imprisoned Boethius to sigh of Philosophy's sweet consolation. Our tonic is not to consider philosophy's sublime role as the handmaid of theological speculation. All these values are true and will not pass away. But we, among today's disordered minds . . . ? Doesn't our peril lie in never having tried to know a true philosophy. Still, it is *not* too late.

So it cannot be thought apocalyptic to emphasize the timeliness of Thomism. It cannot be thought opportunistic to pounce upon an accidental consideration. In time of crisis, the accidental often assumes monumental proportion. Man, by the urgent bent of his intellectual nature *will* rationalize—if not according to reality, then independent of it. This is the first symptom of approaching chaos, especially since the advent of those somewhat embarrassing companions of an uneasy twentieth century: the atomic and hydrogen bombs.

The cards are on the table. Which will it be? Reason or unreason? Order or disorder? Being or non-being?

Epilogue: Our age yearns for one thing in its calmer moments: world *peace*. But external peace can only be founded on internal peace, which is defined: *the tranquillity of order*. This is the peace that filled St. Thomas' soul. He found it by opening his mind and heart to the vision of order presented by creation. Let us open ours to that selfsame vision, that seeing we may see, and hearing we may hear, and our being may be flooded with that peace we so ardently seek.

O Thoma, duc nos per visibilia hujus mundi ad invisibilia Dei, in quo est summa Veritas et vera Pax.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Under this last "standard" is included—at the risk of a philosophical peccadillo—Logical Positivism. Suffice it for our purpose that both systems emphasize the natural and idolize the fact.

² St. Thomas enumerated four such orders: the natural, logical, moral, and artistic (mechanical). *In Libros Ethicorum*, L 1, lect. 1.

³ Only the skeletal lines of argumentation can be here presented, as a hint of what man's reason can accomplish. The wealth of missing detail can be supplied by recourse to the classical "five ways" of St. Thomas Aquinas.

⁴ e.g., the common word "healthy," when applied to both food and complexion in relation to the body (in which alone health is properly found) carries different nuances in each instance: *cause* of health; *sign* of health; *proper subject* of health.



From the foregoing it is evident that God produces his effects according to his Wisdom. According to the Philosopher, it is the mark of a wise man to place things in order. For ordering of things can only come about through a knowledge of the relationship and proportion of the things placed in order—to each other, and to some higher being which is the end of them all. For the very order which things have to each other is because of their being ordered to an end. Now only one having intelligence can know the relationships and proportions of things to each other. And to judge of things through their highest causes is the province of wisdom. So it must be that all ordering is done through the wisdom of some intelligent being. And so even in the mechanical arts architects are called *wise men* in their own speciality. But things which are the handiwork of God do not have their order to each other by mere chance—since their order is unvarying, or most habitual. And so it is clear that God produced things in existence by placing them in order. So it is that through his wisdom God produced things in existence. *Summa Contra Gentiles* II, 24.