

honor. At times even Jeremiah was reported to have won the confidence of the princes and all the people.

While rejecting and persecuting individual prophets, Israel did not doubt that God could speak through the prophets. When the prophetic institution ceased to exist at the time of the Machabees, Israel awaited its reappearance. But they waited in vain because its necessity had ceased. Prophets were unnecessary because the religious revelation and moral code were full and clear. They were unnecessary, too, because the people were instructed by the scribes and doctors. The period of Old Testament prophecy, however, did not close until John the Baptist appeared preaching penance and announcing the coming of the kingdom. He was the last of that long line of devoted prophets before Jesus Christ, the crown and consummation of all their prophecies.

Into that Israelite society the prophets cut like scalpels into a diseased body. Without them Israel could never have lived. Without them Israel could never have known about the Messiah. Without them kings could not have ruled. Without them there would have been no religious, social, or moral reforms. Yahweh's messengers were men who defied all established patterns of thought. When they stood up and proclaimed, "Thus saith the Lord," their sole objective was the good of Israel. They never shrank from their duties; indeed, they were under a moral compulsion to deliver the messages of God to His chosen ones. To no other people in the history of mankind has God ever sent any messengers like the prophets.

—Leonard Tracy, O.P.

SOME SERIOUS THOUGHTS ON THINKING

UNLESS THE PHILOSOPHER attempts to supply the wisdom which his age needs, he has reneged on the social obligation of his calling. One of the most serious needs of this age is wisdom's judgment upon the value of human knowledge. Our contemporaries find this the crucial problem determining their attitude toward the natural sciences, the nature and end of man, metaphysics, the proofs for the existence of God.

The thomist, with his strong convictions on all of these points, is obliged by his commitment to the service of truth and by the philosopher's duty to the human community to bend his thoughts upon this critical or epistemological problem, as it has come to be called.

The best approach to the epistemological problem of modern thought would be a survey of its development from Descartes through Locke, Hume, and Kant to the current positivistic and analytic schools, with a diversion on neo-thomism. Only a large book could handle that task adequately. It is sufficient for our purpose to summarize the questions which philosophy has settled upon to ask about knowledge.

Critical philosophies have always originated as a reaction against a prevailing skepticism grown out of a corrupt state of philosophy. Descartes opposed the refined, humanistic skepticism of Montaigne and the decadent scholasticism of the Renaissance. Kant was stirred to action by Hume's clever wrecking of the shallow rationalism of the eighteenth century. The first problem these philosophers faced in an attempt to salvage human thought was that of certitude. They searched for infallible and undeniable criteria of truth, and in the process deemed it necessary to clear the ground completely and begin philosophy from new foundations.

The norm of certitude has usually been determined by the predilection of the philosopher. For Descartes it was the clarity and distinctness of conception and the deductive method of mathematics. Kant chose the intuitionism of mathematical physics. In historical fact, the norm has been one and univocal, and therefore not universally applicable. The criteria certified only one kind of knowledge while we seem to know in many different ways. Thence arises the second epistemological problem, that of the multiplicity of human knowledge. The only answer consistent with their commitment to the norms upon which they were going to rebuild philosophy was to deny the status of true knowledge to those kinds which do not conform. And that is what Descartes and Kant did.

Possessing many kinds of "knowledge" which were false and deceptive and gave them nothing, and only one kind which they could accept as truthful, they were faced with the third problem: what is truth? Truth was what they were looking for, affirmation against a pervasive skepticism. They had swept the errors of the past into the trash-heap. They had begun to rebuild philosophy on a foundation secure against doubt or denial. They would allow as truth only that which measured up to the criteria they had established. Truth, then, is knowledge which is evident, necessary, and certain; the rest is deception and illusion.

There is one more question pertaining to epistemology which the critical philosophers, strangely enough, never seemed to have asked. This failure was a fatal flaw in their work of reconstruction, and the continued failure to ask it is, to a considerable extent, responsible for the confusion of contemporary philosophy. Yet, when it is placed, its basic relevance to the epistemological problem is evident. It is the all-important question of the nature of knowledge itself. Its solution is one of the unique glories of the perennial philosophy of the aristotelian and thomistic tradition.

In this article we do not propose to refute the opinions of Descartes, Kant, or their successors, nor to offer a complete solution to the problems they have raised. These are merely some observations on the nature and method of epistemology. But we hope first to indicate the general approach of the thomist to the fundamentals of a realist epistemology. Then we will consider the stage in the growing philosophical culture of the seeker of wisdom at which a critical judgment of the truth value of human knowledge may be made, and, consequently, the place where the tract on epistemology properly fits into the college or seminary course of philosophy. Finally, we shall attempt to solve some difficulties which might be urged against the positions taken.

General Approach

The function of the epistemological tract in the body of philosophical science is to pass ultimate judgment on the truth-value of human knowledge. Knowledge in man is a multiple reality; for our external senses perceive partial aspects of exterior material things which are immediately present; the internal senses are able to unite the data from the external senses, to separate and recombine these data and even to evoke them when the things themselves are not present, and the mind penetrates beyond the sensible, changing rind of things into the inner core, from which it withdraws (abstracts) the stable nature or essence. We call all of these strikingly diverse acts knowledge, and rightly so; for in their very diversities they are comparable one to another by a certain essential similarity or proportion. Each puts us in contact, "informs" us with a distinct aspect of reality, so that, as St. Thomas observes, man is perfected not only by his own forms which he has *subjectively*, but by the forms of other realities which his knowing faculties have *objectively* as well. The object and the mode of achieving it are different in each case. Therefore truth, the conformity of the knowing power with its object, will be different in each case. With this "analogical" nature of human knowledge in mind, the critical con-

sideration must carefully make and maintain the distinction of each mode.

The blurring of these distinctions, as regards the interior senses and the intellect, was the initial error of Locke and Hume. Classing them as one and judging them by the same criteria, they put no more content and no more value in intellectual perceptions than in the fantasies of imagination and memory. Locke did not follow through to the logical conclusion; but Hume did, and necessarily wound up in skepticism. For if the intellect sees no further into reality than imagination, essences and necessary connections are merely fabrications of the mind. The principle of causality is destroyed, and all that is left is a probable predictability of succession based on past consistency. Therefore, there can be no such thing as philosophical certitude, and consequently no natural philosophy and metaphysics; for neither subjects nor their principles of demonstration are accessible to us. That is why mechanistic physics, which makes maximum use of the imagination, became the perfect and normative human science.

On the other hand, while preserving their distinction, epistemology must consider the radical unity of the knowing faculties in the human person and their functional unity in his search for truth. Because of their complex interconnection and mutual interdependence, it must insist on the veracity of all of them. They stand or fall together. If any one or group of them is subjected to formal doubt, made to prove its veracity, or dismissed as deceptive, all of them are undermined. Descartes, laying the foundations for his renewal of philosophy, was willing to reject the senses. The only way he could get back to them was by appeal to the guarantee of a truthful God (that perfect being of his thought)—pious certainly, but hardly philosophical. Kant rightly charged him with assuming, contrary to his own principles, the ability of the intellect itself to know objective reality. If one faculty is questioned, there is no reason to accept any other, and therefore no valid test to apply. We are left with no consistent stopping point short of complete solipsism, the extreme form of idealism which maintains that the thinking subject is the only being which exists, and that other things are merely appearances passing before his consciousness. That way lies madness.

Realism cannot give an inch in this matter. In the nineteenth century some neo-thomists tried to meet critical philosophy half-way. They conceded that sensible qualities were not in things themselves but were produced by and in the sense organs. The intellect, by an inference from the principle of causality, concluded to the existence of some extramental cause proportionate to this effect. They were led to this position by the

mechanistic physical theory of sensible qualities accepted at the time, not seeing that this theory was itself founded on the gratuitous rejection of their reality by Descartes and Locke. Obviously this "critical realism" is no help at all; for if it were true, then our senses certainly are false and deceptive. This is not the way things appear to us.

Thomistic epistemology is not a philosophical science in its own right. It has no proper subject or principles of demonstration. Therefore, there is no properly epistemological doctrine separate from the whole body of philosophy. The material it works with comes to it from logic, psychology, and metaphysics; there is no new knowledge about knowledge discovered. But since questions and doubts have been raised, it is philosophy's duty to answer them. Thomistic epistemology is, consequently, defensive and explanatory, and its principle weapons are the principle of contradiction and reduction to the absurd.

It seems to follow, then, that the elaborate syllogisms found in so many scholastic manuals are out of place. The syllogism is a valuable tool of philosophy. It serves as an accurate regulator of the reasoning process; for its very structure manifests the passage of the mind from two previously known truths to a new truth. But it is improperly used in the case of a single truth which is grasped by the apprehension of the two terms involved and their necessary connection one with the other. Very often an objector can say: you have proved nothing, because the subjects and the predicates of all three of your propositions are the same. Such procedure also begets a misapprehension in the student. He thinks he has demonstrated the validity of human knowledge but he has not. It cannot be demonstrated. If he misunderstands the method of defense, it is not only useless to him, it might make the very defensibility questionable to him. We do not wish to make the procedure of epistemology pat or easy. Often extended explanations are necessary to bring the mind to grasp the subtleties involved. But the method of presentation should reproduce the intellect's mode of operation in such matters, so that the student will understand what is being done, and thus make the doctrine more readily his own.

The Place of Epistemology

The syllabus of philosophy courses in very many Catholic colleges and seminaries places epistemology or *critica* either first or immediately after formal logic; at any rate, before any of the sciences concerned with real being. It is apparently regarded as the necessary foundation for any further philosophical inquiry, and with some reason. How can I pretend

to analyze and understand with certitude the phenomena of the external world, unless I am sure: 1) that there is a world external to my consciousness, 2) that I am in real contact with it as it is, and 3) that I am capable of analyzing it correctly? Further, how can I hope to persuade the critically oriented modern mind of the permanent value of the insights of the thomistic tradition, unless I first answer its inevitable questions and objections, unless I first assure it of the certitude of human knowledge?

This is the practice initiated by the fathers of modern philosophy well-nigh universally accepted ever since. Descartes launched his philosophy with a search for a method which would generate universal certitude, and he found one which could make him certain about anything he wished. Others have not had such good luck. Kant also initiated his reconstruction of metaphysics by a quest for the ground of certitude, but had to break off with a question mark; for he could never work his way out of his own subjectivity.

Did they fail because they did not find the right answer? And shall we supply the right answer and then go on to develop our philosophy? Fr. L. M. Regis, O.P., has shown in his brilliant book *Epistemology* (New York, Macmillan, 1959) that their initial and irretrievable error was to ask the wrong questions. They asked immediately for certitude. But certitude is a quality of truth, and truth is a property of knowledge, which in turn is an activity of man. If there is a thomistic answer to the epistemological problem, it must be given in a way consonant with the thomistic procedure. Now, for Aristotle and St. Thomas, a property or activity is not fully and definitively known until it is resolved into essential knowledge of its ultimate subject. Therefore, our epistemology must begin with a full understanding of the nature of man. The proper order of the questions to be asked is: 1) What is man? 2) What is knowledge? 3) What is truth? 4) What is certitude? This is not an arbitrary demand. Epistemology proposes to pass judgment on human knowledge. But it is impossible to make an accurate evaluation of anything, especially involving a relation as cognition does, without a clear knowledge of what it is supposed to be.

The necessity of philosophical psychology as a prerequisite to an adequate epistemology is obvious. To begin without it, as most critical philosophers have done, is to try to hang up the wash without a clothesline. Nor can we merely dip into it and take only what is immediately relevant, the tract on knowledge. We must begin with the fundamental question, the analysis of the nature of life itself. When we have grasped that life is self-motion from an interior principle which reaches out to absorb exterior

reality in a variety of modes, we can progress to the analysis of an operative potency or faculty and to the key concept of the subject-object relationship. All shades of idealism have put vital operations on the level of a physical action and reaction of a mechanistic stamp. Reality proclaims itself to be otherwise. To be sure, there are physical and chemical processes involved, but the unique and *vital* difference is the mutual correlation achieved by the reduction to one actuality of diversities having an essential but potential ordering to one another. Thus the "sense in act" becomes the "sensible in act" by the act of sensation, and the "generator in act" is united to the "generated in act" in generation. We must also carefully distinguish the proper and formal objects of the faculties from their common and material objects, a distinction which leads to the solution to the problem of error.

Building up and making more specific our psychology, we come to the tract on knowledge itself. The all-important notion here is the formal unity—the unity of form—between the knower and the known. The very same form, e.g. the color or essence, which the object has in its real being is possessed by the knowing faculty in an *intentional* manner. Slight reflection reveals that this is the obvious fact; though it is difficult to penetrate philosophically, and there always remains a fundamental mystery. But this is the keystone of realist philosophy.

Knowledge as an object of philosophical investigation offers the first evidence of its nature only in the order of formal causality. Thomism proceeds *a posteriori* from an analysis in the formal order to the discovery of its efficient causes, that is, from an analysis of what knowledge is, we investigate how it comes to be. Descartes, Locke and others sought first to explain it by efficient causality and fell into either a mechanism or some form of innatism. They could hardly do otherwise. We always explain the unknown in terms of what is more known to us. The efficient causality best known to us is physical. If we accept it into our theory of knowledge, the cognitive order is thereby reduced to the physical order. If we see that it is inadequate, we exclude efficient causality from knowledge and cut ourselves off from any real contact with things as they are in themselves. But if by investigating the formal cause of cognition—what it is in itself—we perceive that it is of an order of being altogether distinct from the physical and yet demanding an efficient cause because it is not always actual, we search for a unique mode of efficiency proportionate to it. Finally we turn our attention to knowledge in each of its species and bring out both their analogical nature and complex interdependence and interaction.

Also prerequisite to epistemology are logic and metaphysics. The matter of very nearly the whole *Organon* should be understood, the three acts of the mind in all their aspects. The rigorous laws of inference guarantee the reasoning process upon which most human knowledge depends. The final part of logic studies the three perfections or virtues of the intellect: science, wisdom, and understanding, which are treated principally in the *Posterior Analytics*. A grasp of the nature of these three virtues is essential for a critical evaluation of knowledge; for by understanding we possess the first principles which are the foundation for knowledge, by science conclusions which are necessary and certain, and by wisdom the ultimate criteria for that reflective judgment which is the aim of epistemology. Upon the understanding of the intellectual virtues depend both the understanding of the whole structure of thomistic philosophy and its justification as knowledge which is *true*, i.e. conformed to reality as it is in itself, *necessary*, i.e. such that it in no way can be other than it is, and *certain*, i.e. firmly adhered to without fear of error.

Metaphysics makes an important contribution in the tract on the transcendental property of being which is truth. In deceptively simple and arid formulae, this tract establishes the profound principle that everything which exists possesses interior to itself an intelligibility which is identical with its very being. Reality is made by Intelligence for intelligence. The hunger of the created intellect to conform itself to this intelligibility, this intrinsic formality of the real thing, is its very nature. Even the permanent disappointment engendered by skepticism attests to it. On the other hand, that the real thing depends directly and immediately upon uncreated but creating Intellect, is not a guarantee of our knowledge since it is a conclusion. But it illuminates the critical problem by reflection, placing it in the perspective of the natural and necessary commensuration of being to Mind in the efficient order, and thus exciting confidence in the conformability of mind to being on the created level. And that is the principal object of our inquiry.

All of the foregoing doctrines are prerequisite to the epistemological question, for they all enter into the very substance of the answer. The student needs a sound grasp of them even to appreciate the significance of the problems raised, let alone to penetrate their solution. Otherwise, he can only accept them on human faith. Since this is out of place as part of the structure of philosophy, he thus begins his studies on a false footing. He may be embarrassed later to find his glib quotation of a stock solution vigorously and effectively challenged. Perhaps he will mistake the inadequacy

of his understanding of the realist epistemological position for an inadequacy of the position itself.

Ultimate judgment of the objective value of human knowledge, therefore, can be made only after the study of logic, psychology, and the analytic or scientific part of metaphysics. It takes its place properly at the termination of philosophical inquiry, at that climax at which metaphysics transforms itself into a wisdom. After ranging over all reality and attaining to the highest cause of all things, the intellect from the fullness of knowledge which it now enjoys turns back to regard all that has come under its scrutiny, and to reflect upon the path which it has travelled. This is the moment of the critique. The intellect is now qualified to give its final judgment upon all being and every manifestation of being, including its own work.

Unity is the master key which enables the intellect to unlock this innermost chamber of knowledge and alone gives it the right to do so. This unification of all being and of all knowledge of being which wisdom achieves is beyond the scope of the limited perfections of the intellect previous to this stage of development. Philosophical science, since it is demonstrated knowledge (knowledge of conclusions through a reasoning process) is multiple and disparate as the conclusions are multiple and the middle terms of demonstration are disparate. Though a measure of unification can be attained by a reduction of conclusions back to their ultimate subject (e.g., as all the properties of a triangle are seen to be contained in the definition of a triangle), this is a unity strictly limited to that subject (e.g., all triangles but only triangles) and so unable to judge definitively itself or anything else (e.g., the geometer as such is unable to tell us the degree of certitude or the measure of conformity to reality of his science, or where it fits in the hierarchy of human sciences). The virtue of understanding principles is knowledge only in an inchoative, undeveloped, potential state and thus incapable of defending itself or anything else. Further, though it sees each principle by one insight (e.g., as the intellect apprehending what an effect is, sees at the same time its eternal and absolute need for a cause), yet it achieves no unity between principles (e.g., it cannot see a connection between the principles of contradiction and of causality).

But when metaphysics has penetrated into the basic, intrinsic constituents of contingent being—essence and existence, act and potency—and has looked upward to catch a glimpse of the self-existing, First Cause of all which is pure act, it embraces and explains all reality in its inner

structure and ultimate causes. Now it turns back to regard in one glance all of the intellect's previous knowledge, reaching down to the remotest properties of the particular species of being. At the same time and by the same act it applies, in the cognitive order, the first principles of knowledge to all of the conclusions of the scientific process, and so achieves the distinctive mark of wisdom, that wedding of the unity of insight characteristic of understanding with the penetration and scope of science. Wisdom then perceives not only the unity of all reality, but also the unity of the knower with reality (which is the essence of knowledge), the unity of all types of knowledge in the one knowing subject, and, finally, the unity of man the knower with the world of intelligible reality in which he lives.

Formal truth (truth known as such) consists in the conformity of the knowing power to reality coupled with a reflective act of the knowing power recognizing and assenting to that conformity. Wisdom, as the concurrence of the vision of all being in the light of first causes with the vision of all conclusions in the light of first principles, embraces all reality and all knowledge in one act of conformity and of reflective recognition and assent. This is the office of wisdom alone; for sensation is incapable of a reflective act, and neither understanding of principles nor demonstrated science have this universality. Thus the epistemological response, the final definitive judgment upon the truth, certitude, infallibility, penetration, and finality of human knowledge, is but the obverse side or intentional aspect of the metaphysical judgment upon the degree of reality, necessity or contingency, actuality, and finality of the ontological object of knowledge. In knowing reality, wisdom knows itself knowing, and thus its own act of knowing.

It only remains to bring together and to unify the separate elements of the epistemological tract from logic, psychology and metaphysics. Aware of all the factors upon which knowledge depends: our knowing powers, the intelligibility in reality, apprehension, the reasoning process, rules of evidence and argumentation, etc., we are now qualified to judge and to defend the scope, the depth, the real but limited truth value of human knowing, as well as to admit its relative superficiality and imperfection.

Some Objections

Has thomism constructed a system whose foundation is the last thing to be put in place? That would be true, if, going along with the crowd, we were to accept the presuppositions of Descartes. Even the neo-thomists are willing to concede that Descartes has so altered the face of philosophy

that it is now naive and a *petitio principii* to maintain a realist position before undertaking a critique of it. But Descartes is the best argument against himself. He has shown, in spite of his own intentions, that there is no solidly founded and logically consistent way to break out of the universal methodic doubt. One of the tasks of *critica* is the dispersal of doubt. This cannot be done with more doubt, but only with truth. To put *critica* in the vanguard of philosophy is to send it into battle without its weapons. If, however, we postulate the principles necessary for solution, we denude them of the intelligibility they have in their proper scientific context, and we commit the philosophical sin of dogmatism.

The foundation of philosophy is reality as manifested in the evidence of the senses and the first principles of the intellect. Only after the critical examination of the real order is the mind capable of a critical examination of its own knowledge. The growing structure of philosophy is guaranteed in each movement by the laws of inference and by constant return to the evidence. But epistemology aims at an explanation and justification of philosophical knowledge as a whole. This is a master work, of which the apprentice or journeyman is incapable. Only the mind perfected by wisdom, enriched by the knowledge of being in its ultimate causes, has the natural right to give ultimate judgment on the processes and conclusions of reason.

Since it is founded on a basic realism, rather than an idealism, thomism has no need to find a way to break out of subjectivity, no need to build a bridge between reality and the powers of apprehension. This is not a gratuitous leap across the gap by an act of blind faith in the veracity of sensitive or intellectual apprehension. The foundation of realism, the subject-object relation, rests four square upon the principle of contradiction. If the greenness of the leaves which I have in my sight or the nature of the plant which I understand is not the greenness in the leaves themselves or the plant's own nature, I do not see the leaves or understand the plant. Then to know something is to know it not, and knowledge is non-knowledge. If apprehension is not an immediate contact with reality, the immanent possession of reality caused in the faculty by that reality, it is nothing, knowledge is nothing, and philosophy, including epistemology, is absurd. The only stance left is solipsism.

Those who question this patent truth and ask for some further assurance usually have in the back of their minds the explicit or implicit conviction that all knowledge must be demonstrated. Demonstration, of course, requires a middle term uniting the logical subject and object by

reason of its own more obvious and more certain connection with each. In this case the middle term should be a previously and better known causal link between the metaphysical subject (the knower) and the metaphysical object (the known). But it is utterly impossible that there be such a middle term at these initial stages of knowledge, for two reasons. First, we have already seen that knowledge first manifests itself to us as a unity between the knower and the known by a simple reflection upon our apprehension. It takes a process of analysis and reasoning to come to even an obscure knowledge of the cause which brings this about. Thus, there is no previous and better known link between knowledge and its object. Second, supposing that there were such a middle term connecting subject and object, it would require other acts of knowledge linking subject to middle term and middle term to object. Therefore, a previous and better known link would be necessary for each of these connections, and so on to infinity. But infinity by definition cannot be encompassed; and so, on this supposition, there could be no beginning of knowledge and therefore no knowledge. As an *ad hominem* clincher it can be pointed out that no one who maintains this position philosophically would wait for a proof of the veracity of his apprehensions before acting on the practical level.

Thomistic epistemology does not overlook the problem of error. It is too constant a companion of both the philosopher and the ordinary man to be ignored. Error, real or apparent, is the source of the epistemological problem; for if it did not occur, we would have no need to search out the criteria to save ourselves from it or to justify our knowledge against it. On the other hand, if we did not possess truth we would not know of even the existence of error. However, once we have understood and justified our knowledge, error remains only a pitfall in the progress of the individual and not a corruption at the heart of philosophy. And it is a pitfall we need not be entrapped in, for there are sufficient safeguards. The rules of logic governing the formulation of definitions and arguments keep us from the grossest and most common errors which derive from a misuse of our reasoning powers. The rules of procedure proper to the particular branches of philosophy establish the type of evidence peculiar to each, the mode of argumentation which that evidence supports, and the degree of certitude commensurate with the material under investigation.

—Urban Sharkey, O.P.