The Superiority of Aristotelian to Modern Philosophy and the Failings of Modern Aristotelian Philosophers

by Mortimer J. Adler

I.

[Editor's introduction: Section I is excerpted from Chapter 14 of *Philosopher at Large: An Intellectual Autobiography* (Copyright Center for the Study of the Great Ideas; used with permission). Edited by John C. Cahalan.]

If I were to label myself an Aristotelian, I would mean not only that I have tried to philosophize in Aristotle's manner and with his temper, but also that my search for philosophical truth has always reached bedrock only when it succeeded in digging down to the foundations that Aristotle laid-foundations too often ignored in our day because they are now so far underground. . . .

I believe I can say, without inaccuracy or exaggeration, that almost all of the philosophical truths that I have come to know and understand I have learned from Aristotle, or from Thomas Aquinas as a student of Aristotle, or from Jacques Maritain as a student of both Aristotle and Aquinas. I have admiration for a few modern philosophers-two in particular I have read with delight and sympathy, John Locke and John Stuart Mill. But I cannot attribute to them the origin of a single truth that I cherish, with the possible exception of the truth that democracy is the only perfectly just form of government. It is mainly in the field of political philosophy that the thought of the ancients is both erroneous and defective and needs correcting and enlarging in the light of insights developed in modern times. Even here, I find it necessary to add that modern advances are unfortunately accompanied by the fiction that civil society came into being as the result of a contract entered into by men living anarchically in the state of nature. Aristotle and Aquinas would not have had to employ that fiction in order to explain the truth that modern thinkers such as Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau were reaching for-the truth that the state, or political community, is both natural and conventional, natural in the sense that it is needed for a good human life (or at least a better one than men could live in a hypothetical state of nature), and conventional in the sense that it is voluntarily instituted and constituted, not the product of instinctive determination as is the beehive or the anthill.

To say, as I have said, that I have not learned a single fundamental truth from the writings of modern philosophers is not to say that I have learned nothing at all from them. With the exception of Hegel and other post-Kantian German philosophers, I have read their works with both pleasure and profit. The pleasure has come from the perception of errors the serious consequences of which tend to reinforce my hold on the truths I have learned from Aristotle and Aquinas. The profit has come from the perception of new but genuine problems, not the pseudoproblems, perplexities, and puzzlements invented by therapeutic positivism and by linguistic or analytical philosophy in our own century.

The genuine problems to which I am referring are questions that I have been generated under the cultural circumstances characteristic of modern times, especially the effect on

philosophy of its gradually recognized distinction from investigative science and from dogmatic theology, as well as the effect on it of certain developments in modern science and certain revolutionary changes in the institutions of modern society.

The profit to be derived from the perception of these problems (of which Aristotle and Aquinas were not aware or were only dimly aware) is the stimulus it gives us to try to extend their thought in response to them. I have always found that I could solve such problems within the general framework and in the light of the basic principles of their thought. They may not have faced the questions that we are obliged to answer, but they nevertheless do provide us with the clues or leads needed for discovering the answers.

Many years ago, in our early days together at the University of Chicago, my friend Dick McKeon once quipped that the difference between the members of the American Philosophical Association and the members of the American Catholic Philosophical Association was that philosophers in our secular universities specialized in very good and novel questions, to which the scholastic philosophers did not yet have the answers, whereas the scholastics had a rich supply of true principles and conclusions but usually failed to be aware of many important questions to the answering of which they could be applied. My own experience has confirmed the wisdom as well as the wit of that observation. . . .

In the eyes of my contemporaries, the label "Aristotelian" has dyslogistic connotations: it has had such connotations since the beginning of modern times. To call a man an Aristotelian carries with it highly derogatory implications. It suggests that his is a closed mind, in such slavish subjection to the thought of one philosopher as to be impervious to the insights or arguments of others. However, it is certainly possible to be an Aristotelian-or the devoted disciple of some other philosopher-without also being a blind and slavish adherent of his views, declaring with misplaced piety that he is right in everything he says, never in error, or that he has cornered the market on truth and is in no respect deficient or defective.

Such a declaration would be so preposterous that only a fool would affirm it. Foolish Aristotelians there must have been among the decadent scholastics who taught philosophy in the universities of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They probably account for the vehemence of the reaction against Aristotle, as well as the flagrant misapprehension or ignorance of his thought, that is to *be* found in Thomas Hobbes and Francis Bacon, in Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz. The folly is not the peculiar affliction of Aristotelians. Cases of it can certainly be found, in the last century, among those who gladly called themselves Kantians or Hegelians; and in our own day, among those who take pride in being disciples of John Dewey or Ludwig Wittgenstein. But if it is possible to be a follower of one of the modern thinkers without going to an extreme that is foolish, it is no less possible to be an Aristotelian who rejects his errors and deficiencies while embracing the truths he is able to teach.

I think the published record will support my claim to being an enlightened Aristotelian. I have written articles and books that focussed on deficiencies or errors in the thought of Aristotle and Aquinas: for example, their erroneous position with respect to natural slavery; their inadequacies and mistakes in political theory; their failure to resolve their own inconsistencies with regard to the specific forms of life; their claim to have demonstrated the existence of God.

I will presently relate the stubborn opposition I encountered from colleagues who regarded themselves as Aristotelians and Thomists when I published such criticisms of Aristotle and Aquinas. There were moments when I thought I knew how it felt to be an excommunicated

heretic, or how it felt to be thrown out of the Party for being a Marxist revisionist. I mention these experiences here to substantiate two points, not one—the point that there are doctrinaire adherents of doctrines which have considerable truth in them, and the point that I am not one of them.

Even granting that it is possible to be an Aristotelian without being doctrinaire about it, it remains the case that being an Aristotelian is somehow less respectable in recent centuries and in our time than being a Kantian or a Hegelian, an existentialist, a utilitarian, a pragmatist, or some other "ist" or "ian." I know, for example, that many of my contemporaries were outraged by my statement that Aristotle's *Ethics* is

> a unique book in the Western tradition of moral philosophy . . . the only ethics that is sound, practical, and undogmatic, offering what little normative wisdom there is for all men to be guided by, but refraining from laying down rules of conduct to cover the multifarious and contingent circumstances of human life. In the history of Western moral thought, it is the only book centrally concerned and concerned throughout with the goodness of a whole human life . . . and with putting the parts together in the right order and proportion.

That statement occurs in my Postscript to *The Time of Our Lives: The Ethics of Common Sense.* It is immediately followed by another statement to the effect that

> this book of mine contains formulations, analytical distinctions, arguments, and elaborations that cannot be found in the *Ethics*; in addition, the conceptions and insights taken from Aristotle are not simply adopted without modification, but adapted to fit together into a theoretical framework that is somewhat different from Aristotle's. . . . Much of what is new or altered in my formulation of the ethics of common sense results from my effort to defend its wisdom against philosophical objections that were unknown to Aristotle, or to correct misconceptions, misunderstandings, and ignorances that have dominated the scene in the last few hundred years.

If similar statements were made by a disciple of Kant or John Stuart Mill in a book that expounded and defended the Kantian or utilitarian position in moral philosophy, they would be received without raised eyebrows or shaking heads. For example, in this century, it has been said again and again, and gone unchallenged, that Bertrand Russell's theory of descriptions has been crucially pivotal in the philosophy of language; but it simply will not do for me to make exactly the same statement about the Aristotelian theory of signs (adding that it puts Russell's theory of descriptions into better perspective than the current view of it does).

Why is this so? My only answer is that it must be believed that, because Aristotle and Aquinas did their thinking so long ago, they cannot reasonably be supposed to have been right in matters about which those who came later were wrong. Much must have happened in the realm of philosophical thought during the last three or four hundred years that requires an open-minded person to abandon their teachings for something more recent and, therefore, supposedly better. My response to that view is negative. I have found faults in the writings of Aristotle and Aquinas, but it has not been my reading of modern philosophical works that has called my attention to these faults, or helped me to correct them. On the contrary, it has been my understanding of the underlying principles and the formative insights that govern the thought of Aristotle and Aquinas that has provided the basis for amending or amplifying their views where they are fallacious or defective.

The negative answer given above needs a few words of explanation if it is to be palatable. The explanation involves, first of all, a conception of philosophy itself that helps us to understand how an ancient or mediaeval philosopher can be superior to his modern successors; and, second, a view of the history of philosophy in modern times that helps us to understand why modern thinkers failed signally to improve upon their predecessors.

The various conceptions of philosophy with which I first became acquainted left me very uncomfortable about my choice of philosophy as a career. In one way or another they downgraded philosophy to a second-rate enterprise, making it much less respectable than science as a pursuit of truth, either turning it into a handmaiden of science, or relegating it to the role of commentator on other primary disciplines, or, even worse, conceding that it was more like personal opinion or a work of the imagination than like certifiable and testable knowledge. Of all the intellectual debts I owe Jacques Maritain, and they are many, the greatest is for a conception of philosophy, especially in relation to the empirical sciences, that gave it dignity and made it respectable as an undertaking to which one might devote one's life.

That conception was elaborately set forth in Maritain's *Les Degrés du Savoir,* published in 1932, but I first ran across it in his *Introduction to Philosophy* (1930), and it became for me a vivid and controlling insight after I heard him expound it in one of the first lectures he gave at the University of Chicago. My efforts to assimilate it and develop all its implications have taken many years, during which I produced successively more detailed, and I hope sounder and more mature, statements of the view that philosophy, like science, is a body of knowledge, not a set of opinions, knowledge of the world in which we live, of the nature of things, of man and of society. As such it does not compete or conflict with science. . . .

The great advantage (and a most important one) that the moderns have over their predecessors stems from the fact that the line of demarcation between science and philosophy has been more clearly drawn for them, and so they are safeguarded from venturing into territory that is not theirs. But when ancient or mediaeval philosophers stayed within their own domain (as sometimes they did not), when they were concerned with those purely philosophical questions which science cannot answer and to the answering of which the most advanced scientific knowledge is totally without relevance, their position in time in no way affects the soundness or durability of the answers they formulated.

There are a certain number of mixed questions that cannot be answered solely by philosophical analysis or reflection, but require taking into account the best scientific knowledge available. Here science operates as a check on the answers philosophers propose. An example is the question about the difference between man and other animals, or between the human mind and the artificial intelligence of computers or automata. I addressed myself to this type of mixed question in the second series of Britannica Lectures at the University of Chicago, which subsequently became *The Difference of Man and The Difference It Makes,* published in 1967. The central thesis of that book-that man differs in kind, not degree, from other animals-is one that Aristotle affirmed more than two thousand years ago, and for which Aquinas marshalled impressive arguments more than seven hundred years ago. Nevertheless, new paleoanthropological evidence, scientific findings about human and animal behavior, and technological achievements in the field of computers required me to reformulate distinctions, to consider novel hypotheses, and to construct new arguments in order to reaffirm a conclusion that Aristotle and Aquinas found easier to defend. . . .

In contrast to theoretical questions, or questions of fact, some of which are purely philosophical questions and some mixed questions involving the consideration of the findings of science, all normative questions-all questions about good and evil, or about right and wrong are purely philosophical. However, there is a difference between problems in moral and in political philosophy comparable to the difference between purely philosophical and mixed questions concerning matters of fact. In the sphere of ethics, my third series of Britannica Lectures (published under the title *The Time of Our Lives)* presented a modern version of Aristotle's *Ethics*- a version that was modern not in any of its essential insights, but only in the manner in which they were reformulated and in the arguments that had to be constructed against objections of recent origin. When, however, in my fourth series of Britannica Lectures, I came to deal with problems in political philosophy, the resulting book-*The Common Sense of Politics*-repudiated certain positions taken by Aristotle and Aquinas. In addition, it had to introduce considerations that derived from the writings of Locke, Rousseau, J. S. Mill, and Karl Marx, and it had to take account of institutional innovations and revolutionary changes that have occurred in the last few hundred years.

Having indicated the respects in which modern thought can improve upon the wisdom of the past, I must say once more that, with regard to purely philosophical questions in speculative philosophy-in metaphysics, in the theory of knowledge, in the philosophy of mind-few if any advances have been made in modern times. On the contrary, much has been lost as the result of errors that might have been avoided if ancient truths had been preserved in the modern period instead of being ignored. Why this happened needs to be explained.

Modern philosophy, as I see it, got off to a very bad start-with Hobbes and Locke in England, and with Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz on the Continent. Each of these thinkers acted as if he had no predecessors worth consulting, as if he were starting with a clean slate, to construct for the first time the whole of philosophical knowledge. We cannot find in their writings the slightest evidence of their sharing Aristotle's insight that no man by himself is able to attain the truth adequately, though collectively men do not fail to amass a considerable amount; nor do they ever manifest the slightest trace of a willingness to call into council the views of their predecessors in order to profit from whatever is sound in their thought and to avoid their errors. On the contrary, without anything like a careful, critical examination of the views of their predecessors, these modern thinkers issue blanket repudiations of the past as a repository of errors. The discovery of philosophical truth begins with themselves.

Proceeding, therefore, in ignorance or misunderstanding of truths that could have been found in the funded tradition of almost 2,000 years of Western thought, these modern philosophers made crucial mistakes, both in their points of departure and in their initial postulates-little errors in the beginning which, as Aristotle pointed out, usually lead to disastrous consequences in the end. The commission of these consequential errors can be explained in part by antagonism toward the past, and even contempt for it. The explanation of the antagonism lies in the character of the teachers under whom these modern philosophers studied in their youth. Instead of passing on the philosophical tradition as a living thing by recourse to the writings of the great philosophers of the past; instead of reading and commenting on the works of Aristotle, for example, as the great teachers of the thirteenth century did, the decadent scholastics who occupied teaching posts in the universities of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries fossilized the tradition by presenting it in a deadly, dogmatic fashion, using a jargon that concealed, rather than conveyed, the insights it contained. Their lectures must have been as wooden and

uninspiring as most textbooks or manuals are; their examinations must have called for a verbal parroting of the letter of ancient doctrines rather than for an understanding of their spirit.

It is no wonder that early modern thinkers, thus mistaught, recoiled. Their repugnance, though certainly explicable, may not be wholly pardonable, for they could have repaired the damage by turning to the texts of Aristotle or Aquinas in their mature years and by reading them perceptively and critically. That they did not do this can be ascertained from an examination of their major works and from their intellectual biographies. When they reject certain points of doctrine inherited from the past, it is perfectly clear that they do not properly understand them; in addition, they make mistakes that arise from ignorance of distinctions and insights highly relevant to problems they attempt to solve.

With very few exceptions, such misunderstanding and ignorance of philosophical achievements prior to the sixteenth century have been the besetting sin of modern thought. Its effects are not confined to philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They are evident in the work of nineteenth-century philosophers and in the writings of our own day. We can find them, for example, in the works of Ludwig Wittgenstein who, for all his native brilliance and philosophical fervor, stumbles in the dark in dealing with problems on which his premodern predecessors, unknown to him, have thrown great light.

In the centuries that followed the opening period of modern thought, thinkers who adopted some of the premises of Descartes or Locke while reacting against other elements in their thought compounded the initial errors which they made. Judging the consequences to which the adopted premises led to be unacceptable, these subsequent thinkers should have recognized that these consequences followed from errors that could have been corrected. This they did not do. Instead, in order to avoid consequences they regarded as repugnant, they struck out in other directions and fell into more grievous errors.

Locke, like Descartes, made the initial error of declaring that ideas are the objects of the mind when it thinks. (This stands in sharp contrast to the view held by Aquinas that ideas, far from being the objects we apprehend, are that by which we apprehend objects of perception, memory, imagination, and thought.) Locke also failed to distinguish the cognitive power of the intellect from the cognitive power of the senses. These two mistakes, uncorrected by Locke's immediate successors in English thought, produced the subjective idealism of Bishop Berkeley and the skepticism of David Hume. Carrying Locke's premises to their logical conclusions drove Hume to a position that he himself regarded as practically absurd-unlivable if not unthinkable.

Hume's skepticism and his phenomenalism were unacceptable to Immanuel Kant, even though, as he tells us, they woke him from his dogmatic slumbers. But in his reaction to Hume, Kant did not go back to Hume's starting points to see if the conclusions he found repugnant had their origin in errors that could be corrected. Instead of looking for the little errors in the beginning that accounted for Hume's untenable conclusions, Kant constructed a vast piece of intellectual machinery designed to produce conclusions of an opposite tenor. The intricacy of the apparatus and the ingenuity of the design cannot help evoking admiration, even from those who are suspicious of the sanity of the whole enterprise, but they do not help us to get at the truth, which can be found only by correcting Hume's initial errors, and those of Locke and Descartes, and by starting afresh from correct premises that lead to conclusions quite different from those of either Hume or Kant.

These observations about Kant in relation to Hume apply also to the whole tradition of British empirical philosophy following Locke and Hume. All of the philosophical puzzles,

paradoxes, and pseudoproblems that linguistic or analytical philosophy and therapeutic positivism have focussed their attention on in this century, and have tried to eliminate by inventing philosophical devices designed for that purpose, would never have arisen in the first place if the little errors in the beginning, made by Locke and Hume, had not gone unnoticed, but had been explicitly rejected.

Modern philosophy has never recovered from its false start. Like men floundering in quicksand who compound their difficulties by struggling to extricate themselves, Kant and his successors have multiplied the difficulties and perplexities of modern philosophy by the very strenuousness-and even ingenuity-of their efforts to extricate themselves from the muddle left in their path by Descartes, Locke, and Hume. To make a fresh start, it is only necessary to open the great philosophical books of the past (especially those written by Aristotle and in his tradition) and to read them with the effort of understanding that they deserve. The recovery of basic truths, long hidden from view, would eradicate errors that have had such disastrous consequences in modern times. . . .

> [N. B. Many twenty-first century philosophers might agree with Adler about modern philosophy prior to Frege (or Husserl) but think that Frege gave us a new beginning from which we can correct the errors of the past. They might not say so explicitly, but they would in effect give Frege the place Adler gives Aristotle by assuming that the sound tradition starts with Frege. But no matter how valid Fregean (or phenomenological) methods are in their own domain, post-Fregean philosophy has been more of the same. For example, it has done nothing to reduce disagreement and paradox in philosophy; arguably it has even increased them. Ed. note.]

Dissatisfaction with modern philosophy took hold of my mind in the middle thirties in a form that was, perhaps, less articulate and less definite than the terms in which I have just expressed it. Under its influence, I was inclined to turn toward contemporaries who were thinkers of Aristotelian or Thomistic persuasion-most, if not all, of them teachers of philosophy in Catholic universities. The intellectual community that I could not find in my colleagues in secular universities, certainly not at the University of Chicago, I looked for in the circles of the American Catholic Philosophical Association, the leading members of which at that time, as is no longer the case, acknowledged themselves to be disciples of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. Just as a certain period in the work of a painter is designated by reference to a color or style that characterizes his canvasses over a number of years, so I think it appropriate to speak of the philosophical essays and books that I wrote in the ten years between 1935 and 1945 as the work of my "Thomistic period."

These books and essays were written in a style and in a manner that made their contents relatively inaccessible to anyone who was not in neo-scholastic circles. They were heavily footnoted with references to the texts of Aristotle, Aquinas, and other writers in the tradition of their thought. They were couched in a technical jargon that made sense only to others already accustomed to its use. At that time I was firmly persuaded of the thesis that I presented at a meeting of the American Catholic Philosophical Association in 1937-a paper entitled "Tradition and Communication." In it I argued that the effort to communicate thought is effective only within the framework and against the background of a common tradition. While I still think that thesis sound, I no longer think it should determine the tenor or direction of one's philosophical

writing.

A philosopher should try to communicate his thought in a style that makes it accessible to the intelligent layman. To do so, he should eschew every trace of technical jargon. Though I learned a great deal from the efforts of my Thomistic period, I now regard the books and essays written then as mainly incidents in my own philosophical education, not as philosophical works on which I would like my reputation to rest. In the latter category are the books I have written since 1963, twenty years after I ceased to delight in addressing myself only to an audience of fellow Thomists. . . .

A short time later, I suffered a second shock. My continued study of Aristotle and Aquinas had uncovered what for me were a number of unresolved difficulties. It seemed to me that it would be a highly useful undertaking to write a series of articles about these difficulties under the title "Problems for Thomists." The first in this projected series consisted of a number of articles about the problem of species, published in successive issues of the *Thomist* in the years 1938 and 1939. These articles pointed out that in the writings of Aristotle and Aquinas could be found two quite different views of the specific forms of life, According to one view, supported by a large number of texts, there were only three species of living organisms-vegetative, brute animal, and human life. According to the other view, supported by an equally large number of texts, there were a very large number of species of both plants and animals. Which of these views should prevail? Could they be reconciled by making distinctions not actually made by either Aquinas or Aristotle?

The appearance of these articles raised a storm of protest that blew up at the meeting of the American Catholic Philosophical Association in 1939, fueled by an angry blast, delivered on that occasion, against the impudence of my trying to be a "Thomist revisionist." Jacques Maritain, and one or two others, came to my defense. In fact, when the *Thomist* articles were subsequently published in 1940 in book form, Maritain wrote a foreword to the volume in which he said:

> In striving to establish a *problematic* of Thomism, Mortimer Adler shows us that Thomism is a continuously unfolding philosophy. . . . [He] has not left medieval scholasticism behind in order to meet up with modern thought and to attempt an *adaptation* of the one to the other. If this is what the word "neo-Thomism" means, he is not a "neo-Thomist," He prefers to be a modern Thomist, engaged above all in the current of modern thought, while yet adhering to the truth of Aristotelian and Thomistic principles.

Maritain concluded his foreword by stating the hope "that *The Problem of Species* and the works to follow will excite many readers to a wealth of reflections which will assist them in examining and clarifying their own conceptions."

The "works to follow" never saw the light of day. I decided that calling attention to unresolved difficulties in the thought of Aristotle and Aquinas was just about as unwelcome among my contemporaries who declared themselves adherents of these two philosophers, as similar revisionism was unwelcome in the party founded by Marx and Engels. . . .

One book that goes back to the early years of my "Thomistic period" contains some intimations of these later views of philosophical work. In 1938, I was invited by the Aristotelian

Society of Marquette University to give the annual Aquinas Lecture. I can still remember the agony I suffered in trying to formulate an appropriate message for that occasion. Days and weeks went by, notes accumulated, but no vision of an overall theme emerged. As the date of the lecture approached, Father Gerard Smith telephoned, asking me to submit the manuscript of my lecture two days later. I shuffled through all my notes and made new ones, with the intention of sitting down at my typewriter early the next morning. I did so, and I sat there staring at a blank paper for about an hour, but nothing came-no title, no first sentence. Exhausted by the effort, I lay down on the couch in my study and promptly fell asleep. Awakening, two hours later, I dashed some cold water on my face and once more sat down at the typewriter. Almost immediately I had the title I wanted-"St. Thomas and the Gentiles"-a title that drew reflected light from Aquinas's *Summa Contra Gentiles.* A moment later out came the first sentence and then, without pause, thirty pages rolled out of my typewriter, right down to the final full stop, without a single x-ing out of infelicities, without a single pencilling in of additions or emendations. I had never before had that experience in writing and I have never had it again.

In *St. Thomas and the Gentiles,* I appealed to exponents of the philosophy of St. Thomas to address themselves not to fellow Thomists, but to philosophers generally. It was accompanied by a series of admonitions about how they should conduct themselves in relation to those who did not initially share their admiration of Aquinas-how they should sympathetically approach problems that Aquinas had not himself considered, problems that had arisen since his day, yet problems to the solution of which his thought, if creatively extended, might contribute. My admonitions fell on deaf ears, including, I must confess, my own; for during the next five or six years, I made little or no effort to follow my own advice.

II.

[Editor's introduction: In the work just recommended, *St. Thomas and the Gentiles: The Aquinas Lecture, 1938* (Copyright 1948, Marquette University Press; used with permission), Adler sheds further light into both the superiority of Aristotelian philosophy and the failings of modern Aristotelian philosophers. Concerning the former, he quotes two important remarks of Maritain.]

[In n. 52:]

> The natural weakness of man is incapable of attaining to the possession of the great truths of the natural order as a whole and without admixture of error, although each, considered separately, is within its range (Maritain, *St. Thomas Aquinas,* p. 131).

[And in n. 57:]

> As Pascal saw so dearly, it is the mediocrity of our intellectual capacity in the first place which makes us fall into error, because we are incapable of comprehending simultaneously apparently opposite truths which are in reality complementary. (Maritain, *St. Thomas Aquinas,* p. 98).

[Adler comments, n. 57:] It is the incorrigible mediocrity of the *specific* human intellect which makes antinomies inevitable in the best philosophy, just as in poorer thought it is

the regrettable and remediable mediocrity of the *individual* mind which is the source of error, i.e., avoidable contradictions. Vd. Note 48 supra.

[N.B. It is significant that Aristotelians saw the inevitability of paradox as the source of philosophical error even before Yves Simon gave an Aristotelian demonstration of why paradox is inevitable in "On Order in Analogical Sets." Ed. Note.]

[Adler also says, n. 55:] He [Maritain, in *An Introduction to Philosophy*] showed how "on every one of the great problems of philosophy the doctrine of Aristotle and St. Thomas, when compared with the doctrines of other philosophers, appears as an eminence between two contrary errors. . . . The truth, indeed, is not to be found in a philosophy which keeps the mean between contrary errors by its mediocrity and by falling below then, being built up by borrowing from both, balancing one against another and mingling them by arbitrary choices made without the light of a guiding principle *(eclecticism)* ; it must be sought in a philosophy which keeps the mean between contrary errors by its superiority, dominating both, so that they appear as fragments fallen and severed from its unity. For it is clear that, if this philosophy be true, it must reveal in full what error sees only in part and distorted by a bias, and thus must judge and secure, by its own principles and in the light of its own truth, whatever truth error contains though it cannot distinguish" (*op. cit.,* p. 270). The mean is eminent only when it is extreme. "Virtue, if regarded in its essence, is a mean state, but if regarded from the point of view of the highest good, or of excellence, it is an extreme" *(Nicomachean Ethics,* II, 6). Cf. Note 57 *infra.*

But Maritain's excellent summary is hardly an introduction to philosophy for those who are still gentiles in the sense of being outside the sphere of philosophy itself. Nor can it be for [philosophical; see below] heretics. A text-book, however fine, is certainly not proportionate to the task of arguing with heretics. Even the students who are instructed by it will not be prepared sufficiently for that task. Vd. Maritain's discussion of the two ways of studying the philosophy of St. Thomas, in *St. Thomas Aquinas,* pp. 120 ff.

[And Adler says, pp. 55-56:] There are no peculiarly modern heresies within the province of philosophy itself. That all the errors which have occurred in modern philosophy repeat the falsities of ancient and mediaeval thought is, perhaps, the most striking sign of the perennial character of philosophical truth[54].

[n. 54:] The repetition of both errors and truths gives the history of philosophy its perplexing aspect to those who compare it with the history of science, in which error is corrected by truth and does not recur. Vd. the expansion of this point in *What Man Has Made of Man,* pp. 235-244.

[Continuing from p. 56] There is nothing strictly new about modern materialism or idealism, empiricism or rationalism, naturalism or absolutism. For each of these errors an ancient or mediaeval thinker could be named to parallel his modern counterpart, often superior to the latter in the lucidity of his deviation from the truth. All of these *isms* are to be understood as extremes, containing some truth, but false through failure to possess the truth which is also contained in the opposite extreme[55].

[n.55:] These *isms* are of a different sort from those enumerated in Note 50 *supra.*

[n. 50:]]The central effort of Gilson's William James Lectures was to expose the kind of *isms* which result from the substitution of other subject- matters and methods for those of philosophy. "It is a flat truism that all attempts to deal with philosophical problems from the point of view, or with the method, of any other discipline will inevitably result in the destruction of philosophy itself. Yet such abstract statements usually fail to convince those who hear them, and sometimes even those by whom they are made. One of the greatest uses of the history of philosophy is precisely that it brings us their experimental demonstration" (Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience,* p. 120). The historical evidence which Gilson assembles bears witness to the frustrations of grammaticism, logicism, theologism, psychologism, positivism or scientism. To this list might be added naturalism, or the exclusive predominance of physical questions in philosophy, and transcendentalism, or the exclusive predominance of the metaphysical. Furthermore, as I have tried to show in *What Man Has Made of Man,* these *isms* tend to become associated, as, for instance, positivism, psychologism and naturalism; or logicism, theologism and transcendentalism. And psychologism is often the source by which theologism leads to positivism. Cf. , *op. cit.* p. 68 ff.

[Continuing n. 55:] There the source of error was the substitution of some other subject matter or method for philosophy. Here the difficulty arises from the exclusive development of some partial truth as if it were the whole. The combinations and permutations of these two kinds of *isms* account for the *apparent* novelty of some of the errors which have occurred in modem thought. The possibilities are far from being yet exhausted.

As Gilson's Harvard lectures were an attempt to define the sphere of philosophy by a negation of *isms* of the first sort, so Maritain's *Introduction to Philosophy* strove to formulate the mean position between partially true extremes of philosophic doctrine. . . .

[Continuing from p. 56] The whole truth lies between them in the eminent mean which is a synthesis of, not a compromise between, their partial, hence inadequate, insights. To attain this whole truth is obviously the work of intellectual virtue; the extremes of speculative vice are in every case either an excess, which is dogmatism, or a defect, which is agnosticism.

III.

[Editor's introduction: Concerning the shortcomings of modern Aristotelian philosophers, *St. Thomas and the Gentiles* adds these points.]

[p. 2:] I cannot help thinking of the larger company of men who have heard the clearest voices, but have not heeded. If they have read St. Thomas or what has been written in his tradition, they have not discovered why it is that we rejoice. On the contrary, the praises which might arise here would not re-echo in other corridors of learning. We would be deaf if we did not hear a reverberation of a different sort, an answering cry of dissidence, almost vituperation. Let us forego, then, the pleasure of congratulating ourselves on this anniversary of the teacher to whom we hold all men should be disciples, to ask the unpleasant question whether *our discipleship has been at fault* [emphasis supplied] . . . .

[pp. 6-7:] Despite the fact that the Church, responsive to St. Thomas's ordering of faith and reason, has always refused to convert any humanly contrived doctrine into dogma — honoring the work of St. Thomas as the best philosophy, but philosophy withal and hence forever open to argument, — despite this fact, Thomists have not succeeded in preventing their philosophy from being regarded as a religious creed[3]. We who admire St. Thomas's mastery of the art of intellectual debate, — his dialectical fecundity in posing objections to his own positions as well as in answering them, his scruple in demonstrating only what can be demonstrated, his patient skill in wrestling with errors for the sake of the truth they contain, his prudence in achieving the eminent mean which reconciles opposite extremes, — we must nevertheless *be inept in the practice of his method* [emphasis supplied]. Had we been better imitators, should we have failed so utterly to make our dialectic felt? Could we be charged with not joining issue, with begging the question, with all sorts of arbitrariness and all manner of trickery? Finally, in calling ourselves Thomists we have thought only to declare our devotion to the cause of philosophy itself to the truth which is above the partisan claims of divisive schools. But we find that we are regarded as belonging to a cult, to a movement dangerously subversive of the prevailing culture. Thomism is not the proper name for philosophy in its perennial vitality. It is just one ism among many, and an anachronism at that. . . .

[pp. 19-20:] I am not minimizing the variety of stubborn prejudices against which, it often seems to us, we have to contend. I am not even above expressing the suspicion, in the light of evidences difficult to ignore, that we are not always met with good will. I am only saying that *there is first the mote in our own eye* [emphasis supplied]. We have not seen the problem clearly. Far from making every effort to join issue with those who differ from us, we have, in my judgment, not even begun to make an effort properly directed and properly proportioned to the task at hand. We have been loath to absent ourselves from the felicity of moving further into the interior of philosophical thought, when there is pressing work to be done on the border, the arduous and lowly work of the pioneer. The borderland I speak of is marked by the issue between those who hold, as we do, that philosophy is a field of knowledge in which there can be perennial truth and those who deny it.

I know of no attempt on the part of Thomists to face this issue in a way that is proportionate to the need of their adversaries for patient dialectic, the answering of all objections, the offering of all possible arguments in forms which they will not think beg the question. At this point St. Thomas sets us an example we would do well to follow. I am thinking of the *Summa contra Gentiles,* especially in contrast to the *Summa Theologica.* We have been working with the latter as our model and then wondering why the gentiles of the present day are unmoved, except in the opposite direction. We can cherish the hope of re-working the *Summa Theologica* in forms appropriate to our age, but our immediate obligation is to do the work of the *Contra Gentiles.* I like to think that it is not an historical accident that St. Thomas wrote the *Summa contra Gentiles* first. The pioneer work should come first. If, as St. Thomas says, "it belongs to the wise man to meditate and disseminate truth" and also "to refute contrary falsehood", I propose that such labors begin at the point where the need is greatest. . . .

[p. 30:] The work I am proposing is both wearisome and exacting. It will require us to state the objections of our opponents as fairly and fully as St. Thomas did in the *Summa contra*

Gentiles. We must master, for instance, all the technical innovations of the logical positivists, in order to state their arguments in a manner familiar to them. But is not the prize worthy of the effort? For if this issue can be resolved, the way is clear for the progressive resolution of other issues, even to the most momentous conclusions of metaphysics and natural theology. Failing here, we may possess the truth and meditate upon it, but we cannot perform the other duties of the wise man: to disseminate it and free it from error. . . .

[p. 55:] He [St. Thomas] did not face positivism and systematism in their distinctive modern forms. To combat these tendencies, therefore, requires dialectical ingenuity, as well as new knowledge, on our part.

[p. 57:] Imitating the work of St. Thomas . . . is our only right to call ourselves Thomists. . . . Misconceptions arise in part from our rightful insistence upon the quantity of truth which St. Thomas provides us with as a starting point, as well as from our claim, also justified, that he corrected errors and solved difficulties which have recurred since his day. But it is a starting point, and not the whole truth, for there is obviously work to be done. . . .

[pp. 62-63:] The project I have vaguely envisioned would require a genius to accomplish. . . . Yet if we have talents to use, there must be a task befitting our station. Though St. Thomas was the wise master who planned well and executed much, materials were prepared for him by the labors of many men, some now anonymous, some favored by memory. There is enough labor of this sort for all of us to do, who share the dream of philosophy reaching its modern maturity. The right way to anticipate the genius needed to fulfill our hope is to prepare the way for him. Anything else would be day-dreaming. We shall be good followers of St. Thomas through working for the future, not through looking to the past.

[p. 63-64:] There are many things, of course, which might appear to justify a man in calling himself a Thomist[65]. He might spend his life among the texts trying to purify them of their minor aberrancies by collating passages, or seeking to resolve their major antinomies. I cannot commend either of these occupations to you as philosophers. The former is scholarship, or worse, system-building, and the latter partakes of *hybris,* proudly unmindful of the limits of reason. Or a man might devote him self to teaching, by spoken or written word, the philosophy he has learned from St. Thomas. This is work which must be done and to do it well is both honorable and in the service of philosophy. But I reserve the highest commendation for a third undertaking. It is to engage in the labors I have described[66]. It is to perform the dialectical tasks by which philosophy is kept alive. The man who performs them, however slight his contribution to the ultimate whole, is more fully alive, more actually a philosopher, than any other.

[n. 65:] In Gilson's narration of the history of philosophy as a series of intellectual experiments, one point becomes intensely clear. The great philosophers are always better than their followers. In any period the formative thinkers are directly conversant with reality; in them philosophy begins with wonder about the mysteries of being or of knowledge. Their followers, however, are usually bookish men, finding problems in the texts of their master rather than deep in the nature of things. I do not mean that the formative mind need be unread,

that originality can be bought only at the price of illiteracy; but rather that the great thinkers have made *some* tradition a part of themselves. Books are in the back of their minds as they face the facts of the world about them. The lesser disciples too often hold the book so close before their eyes that they barely see the world around the edges. There are unfortunate consequences. A school of thought arises which lacks the vitality of its source. . . .

[n. 66:] For other statements of the programme of work to be done, vd. A. D. Sertillanges, *St. Thomas Aquinas and His Works* (London, 1932) pp. 139-150 and Maritain, *St. Thomas Aquinas* (London, 1933) pp. 124-125. . . .