

October 29, 2006

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Not so terribly long ago the normal college survey course in the History of Philosophy began with the Pre-Socratics, went on to the classical period of Plato and Aristotle, maybe noticed the Stoics and the Neo-Platonists, moved into early Christian philosophy (often enough reduced to St. Augustine), proceeded to the medieval Schoolmen, and came finally to the modern period. This last period, beginning roughly with Bacon and Hobbes, I suppose, took up about half of the textbook.

When I have occasion to speak to college students nowadays, however, I learn that the contemporary survey course on the History of Philosophy does not include anybody between Plotinus (A.D. 3rd century) and Descartes (first half of the 17th century). That is to say, more than a millennium of Western thought is simply eliminated. I live within walking distance of a university where this is the case.

Obvious this new arrangement is designed to preserve the discipline of philosophy from contamination by "revealed religion," specifically the Bible. Whatever merit is ascribed to that alleged preservation, nonetheless, it seems to me that the historical study of philosophy thereby suffers a disadvantage in (at least) two respects, both having to do with history.

First, such an approach to the History of Philosophy fails by the most elementary criterion of history. No historical study of any subject can simply skip a thousand years at will. Imagine a *History of Weapons* that leaped over everything from the slingshot to intercontinental ballistic missiles. Suppose the writer of such a study argued, in defense of this method, that he didn't want his study of weapons to be "contaminated" by considerations of the sword or the introduction of saltpeter. Sound likely?

Neither is it feasible for some person's biographer to decide he will skip ages 20 to 45 of that person's life. Suppose Gerald Clarke, for instance, in his biography of Truman Capote, had written about Capote's childhood up to about age 19 and then skipped the rest of his life up to the final ten years. We would scarcely know that Capote is mainly remembered as a writer. Would anyone agree that this was a useful biography? The idea is just as silly in the history of philosophy as it is in the life of Capote.

History, after all, has to do with continuity, so a "History of Philosophy" is not really a history if it is not continuous. You can't skip the middle thousand years of a 2500 years of history.

The second objection also pertains to history, and it is this. During the "skipped" period in question, the era of Christian philosophy, it is arguable that philosophy itself was more directly tied to the history of common culture than at any other period.

After all, the average man on the street in classical Athens did not think along lines in the least like Plato (to which fact Plato sometimes made grumbling reference). Again, precious few people in the 17th century thought along lines like those of Descartes or Spinoza (for which circumstance may a merciful God be praised). During both its very early and very late periods, that is to say, philosophy was largely the preoccupation of the elites, not of the common people of history.

This was not true of the period of Christian philosophy. For a millennium and a half every Christian in the world knew the basics of Christian philosophy. If we ask what these basics were--which were the most characteristic and most significant ideas that the Christian Church added to the history of philosophy—the first two answers would have to be (if my shorthand is permitted) "Being" and "beings."

First, Being. According to Christian philosophy, God is the eternal, personal, and necessary Being (He who, if He does exist, must exist). The God "whose being is to be" never entered the mind of classical philosophy. Neither Plato nor Aristotle identified God in these terms. Christian philosophy, however, "contaminated" by the Bible, derived this concept from Exodus 3:14--*ego eimi Ho On*--"I am He Who Is." The simplest Christian, the Christian least given to philosophical speculation, knew this. No elite education was required. This concept formed the basis of a whole new culture that utterly transformed the history of all who received the Christian Gospel.

Second, beings. According to Christian philosophy, God created from nothingness all other things that are. No thing, outside of God, has its existence except by God's creating act. Classical pagan philosophy never dreamed of such a thing. Once again, however, Christian philosophy, still hopelessly "corrupted" by Holy Writ, knew this from the opening of Genesis: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." No advanced study was necessary to grasp this idea. The least educated Christian knew it.

As soon as folks heard these two ideas for the first time, they suddenly thought to themselves, "Well, obviously. Now that you say it, Moses, it's as clear as day. The ideas are perfectly coherent and compelling. Darn, I wonder why we never thought of it before" (I paraphrase St. Augustine, *Confessions* 11.3.5). These ideas, perfectly self-evident on being enunciated, were the foundation stones of Christian philosophy.

In the early 2nd century Hermas of Rome laid it out succinctly: "Before all else believe that there exists only one God, who created and finished all things, and brought all things into being out of nothing" (*The Shepherd*, Mandata 1.1).

These, evidently, are the sorts of ideas the new college curriculum wants to leave out. Nonetheless, because the ideas proper to this philosophy actually gave shape to history, they would seem properly studied in a History of Philosophy.

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