

THE PHILOSOPHICAL PREDICAMENT

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EACH of the books here under review¹ testifies in its own way to the predicament in which philosophy finds itself. But 'predicament' has to be taken in a much wider sense than in the title of Professor Barnes's book. For the predicament of philosophy is this: that the eminent who claim to speak its tongue (and there can be little doubt of the genuine eminence of such thinkers as Russell or Whitehead or Heidegger or Husserl or Maritain or Gilson, to name but several) speak languages not translated, and perhaps not translatable, to each other, about subjects not related, and perhaps not relatable, to each other; and by the very fact of engaging in the conversation of one the would-be philosopher appears to forfeit not merely the right but the very possibility of conversing intelligibly or interestingly with the others; nor (such is the predicament) is he permitted to make any preliminary enquiry before committing himself to one or other company, since to do so is, by the very fact of doing it, to commit himself, in the eyes of one or other group, to an investigation or to some *façon de parler* vicious and vitiating from the outset. So the contemporary positivist has no use for and is not interested in, and, for the most part, is quite ignorant of, the thought of the existentialist, and the existentialist of the positivist, and each of the thomist, and the thomist of them both. To read the books here reviewed together is to feel the disconcerting difficulties of this predicament. Must we say that the difficulties are hopelessly insuperable? This is a question to which, because of the predicament, no theoretical answer can be given. The answer must be the practical one of what happens to philosophy in the next fifty years; which being future cannot be known. But which can, and surely should be, planned, by anyone not entirely a prisoner in the doctrinal compartmentalism of his own making. The classical form of any such planning in philosophy has been, from Par-

1 *The Philosophical Predicament* by W. H. F. Barnes. (A. C. Black; 10s. 6d.)
The Mystery of Being I. Reflection and Mystery by Gabriel Marcel. (The Harvill Press; 15s. 0d.)
The Psychology of Sartre by Peter J. R. Dempsey, O.F.M., Cap. (Cork University Press; 12s. 6d.)

menides's *Two Ways*, Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics* onwards, always a *Discours de la Méthode*. So it may not be without significance, and hopeful significance, that two of these books are in fact just such *Discours*, and the third, by what one may judge to be the failure of a heroic undertaking, points the need of the same. The philosophical planner could therefore do far worse than read each one of these books carefully and sympathetically.

The predicament with which W.H.F.B. is concerned lies at one angle (which is not to deny that it is an extremely important angle) of the whole situation. He examines the claim made by (some) contemporary thinkers that (some) traditional forms of metaphysical or philosophical thought must be wholly abandoned because of the findings of (what some claim to be)² 'analysis'. This claim by the proponents of analysis must necessarily land them, according to W.H.F.B., in the predicament (celebrated since Aristotle's formulation of it) of using philosophy (metaphysics) to destroy philosophy (metaphysics), unless it can be shown that the method of analysis is not in fact philosophy in any traditional sense. This leads W.H.F.B. to an extremely valuable and lucid examination of what 'analysis' is, and, more precisely, what exactly it is that is analysed. It is indeed astonishing to find how little practitioners of analysis have turned their own analytic methods upon their own activity. 'All these questions are in contemporary discussion wrapped in obscurity as dark as that which surrounds the song the sirens sang to Ulysses'. W.H.F.B. in successive chapters traces the various stages and forms that 'analysis' has passed through, from G. E. Moore's first proclamation of it, by way of its most confident attacks in the care of the Logical Positivists of the 'thirties against metaphysics, even to the more subdued tactics of Therapeutic Positivism and of the later utterances of Professor Ayer. It emerges, according to the author, that 'analysis is the critical reconstruction of our language in the interest of a better understanding of the reality', and that as such, it is, and in fact has turned out in practice to be, the surreptitious conduct of properly philosophical criticism. He concludes that its attack upon metaphysics falls into the predicament alleged; and

² I insert the parenthetical *some's*, and could justifiably continue to do so throughout the rest of this review, to remind the reader how little awareness each of the authors under review manifests in regard to each other's problems and terminology. But for sake of euphony, let the parentheses be omitted and understood.

with that he completes his 'underlabourer's' work of clearing the ground for the edifice of philosophy. The book is remarkable for its combination of close criticism and urbane style; as a critical introduction to modern analytic trends of thought it could hardly be bettered.

But what speculation does its author make way for? One suspects, but is not told, some rather old fashioned idealism, and certainly not the speculation of the Gifford Lectures of 1949-50. Probably (I may be quite wrong) W.H.F.B. would not admit at all the legitimacy of M. Marcel's procedures; they belong to a category of the philosophical predicament that is set (if set at all) sideways-on to the one just discussed.

M. Marcel's book (the first and preparatory series of his lectures) is a very moving one; it is the appeal of the introvert against the brutal extroversion of our times. Perhaps the clue to his thought is found when he writes: 'The essential point to grasp now is that in the end I am in some danger of confusing myself, my real personality, with the State's official record of my activities'. This really, and surely rightly, frightens the author; he is a man who cherishes the intimate qualities of human existence and personal relationships, and it is just these that are threatened, indeed undermined, by the spirit of extroversion that battens upon the atomised and collectivised dossier-existence of modern man. The refusal to reflect (an older tradition might have said, to be recollected) and the refusal to imagine (an older and less ambiguous tradition might have said to compassionate—*compatiri*—and to have a sense of the sacramental)—these are the fatal characteristics of this malignant spirit. And so G.M.'s lectures become an exercise in reflection, a *Discours de la Méthode* very far removed from systematic doubting, as the only way to express what reflection is. 'It is necessary that reflection, by its own efforts, should make itself transparent to itself.' And this will lead him to communicate in the mystery of Being (which presumably will be the theme of the next series of lectures): 'Reflection, interrogating itself about its own essential nature, will be led to acknowledge that it inevitably bases itself on something that is not itself, something from which it has to draw its strength'. For reflection turns out to involve spiritual 'presence' whether 'of oneself to itself, or . . . the presence to it of the other that is not really separable from it'; and by 'presence' is meant that a thing is not over-against an

object, as externalised, that it does not, therefore, present *problems* to be *solved*, but transcends enquiry and constitutes the field of the mysterious which is the field for philosophical research in depth reaching to eternity.

All this, and much that is said in the detail of passing, is very suggestive. One might venture to suggest that it is much nearer to classical thomist themes than the author imagines or would care to admit. For example (to take only details) the rejection of any representation (as a kind of grey lumped mass) of experience (*ch. 2*) is something with which any advised thomist should surely concur; G.M. appeals to Husserl's phenomenological approach to save himself from it; but he could have appealed to the careful thomist analysis of the *species expressa* as a *signum formale*. Again when he insists upon the derivative and secondary character of the consciousness of self, and writes 'how difficult it is to succeed in getting a direct glimpse of whatever it is that we mean by self', ought he not to know of the identical theme in Père Gardeil's pages on the subject in *La Structure de l'âme*? When he warns against the danger that the 'initial, living experience' of intellection may survive 'only on condition of degrading itself. . . . of shutting itself up in its own simulacrum' he is putting in his own way what the thomist does who insists that any act of knowledge is a vital *actio immanens* and does not consist in some material imprint of the *species*. And in his assertion that 'intelligence must become at once pure ardour and pure receptivity' there is an almost verbal echo of the theory of *intellectus agens* and *intellectus possibilis*—though G.M.'s analysis of these functions of the intellect should probably be more closely assimilated to an Augustinian illuminism than to St Thomas's position. If this be the case with themes in detail, may it not equally be the case with the thought as a whole?

Here indeed is the problem for thomism. It is the problem characteristic of the predicament of philosophy outlined above, how one philosophical tradition and language is to be related to and translated into another. One remark may here be made. Thomist thought is absolute in a sense that most contemporary thought is not; I mean by that that the thought of a philosopher such as Marcel takes place in the context, and usually in opposition or reaction to a 'classical' tradition (that of the seventeenth-nineteenth century) that has, historically, intervened; thomist

thought knows no such conditioning; it comes from the central *philosophia perennis* of Plato, Aristotle, the neo-platonists and the thirteenth century, before the break-up of that tradition. Certainly, any informed thomist knows of subsequent developments and departures in Western thought, but he knows of them precisely as departures from the norm of tradition; his thought has not been nurtured within such developments, he does not himself suffer from the intellectual tensions consequent upon conception and birth in schism from the central tradition. Therefore the problem for the thomist is twofold; first, how to enter with sympathy into the intellectual *malaise*, that has been produced in contemporary thought by reaction to a tradition from which he himself has been spared; and then, having so entered, how to translate his own much subtler analyses and much wider syntheses into terms that will both be intelligible to, and win the appreciation of, those whose analyses have little weight of tradition to guide their individual attempts, and whose views are often confined to a single compartment of being or behaviour.

I do not think that it is unfair to suggest that this is a task from which contemporary thomists shrink, and that this refusal of labour is in fact our greatest short-coming. It is interesting to notice in a recent report on the Thomist Congress last year in Rome, that one out of seven days was set aside for the discussion of existential thought, and that this was the one day when there was anything like a lack of papers to be read. The rest of the week was, if one may put it, a family affair. Philosophically, there were no interpreters.

It may be said that the onus of making contact should be upon those who have broken away from the main tradition. But to say that is to be merely doctrinaire. Possession is nine-tenths of the law, and it is the schismatics (if we may so call them without intention of giving offence) who are in possession. It is they who belong to our time, who are its children, not thomists. The times are evil, so be it. But that does not exonerate lovers of truth from the obligation to make known the truth; and it cannot be made known unless it be spoken to be understood by those who are to be addressed. In the present predicament of philosophy it is to betray the spirit of St Thomas to turn one's back upon contemporary philosophers saying that they are purveyors of falsehood. They are no more so than the Arabian Aristotelians of the

thirteenth century; and St Thomas's way with them was to enter into their thought, to be stimulated himself by it, and, speaking in its own tongue, to propound anew the classical themes of Christian thought. Is it impossible that thomism should do something of the same thing, and profit in something of the same way, from the several philosophical systems with which it is now contemporary? It is permissible, in a Dominican review, to hold that if we thomists are not able to do this (and to make the laborious endeavour needed), no solution will be found of the predicament of philosophy; for no other tradition of thought affords a framework catholic enough to find a place at once for analysis (in the several senses outlined by Professor Barnes) and the metaphysical and psychological insights of phenomenology and existentialism.

So we are brought to the third of the books under review. Dr Dempsey undertakes to interpret and criticise the psychological aspects of M. Sartre's thought. To pick out and give chapter and verse for the various psychological theses to be found in that author's massive and unsystematic work is already a heroic undertaking; to point to their exact inadequacies, and to commend in the place of these theses (to a public presumably interested in them) the corresponding theses of Aristotelico-Thomist psychology is, one may think, an even more arduous task. Dr Dempsey is to be congratulated on his achievement. The first chapters of his book are in fact a closely documented selection of Sartrean theses concerning the nature of man, liberty, knowledge, imagination and emotion, together with an account of the influence in the formation of these theses of experimental psychology, phenomenology, *gestalt* psychology and psychoanalysis. The second part of the book criticises them, replacing them by rather sketchily outlined thomist theories made (I think) especially palatable to such experimental psychologists as may be supposed by a thomist to be, or to have propensities to being, more *bien-pensant* than others. It is an achievement. But is it the right achievement, is it the kind of interpretation called for by the predicament of philosophy? I confess that I do not think so. To condense existentialist thought into theses is surely to lay oneself open from them to a charge of *ignoratio elenchi*. No matter how much chapter and verse be cited, the whole point of their procedure is that truth cannot be formulated in neat theses outside the context of the living 'flow' of their discourse (hence the close

connection of the novel and the drama with their philosophic writing). One cannot take theses and criticise them; to do so is to betray their thought, and to operate upon its corpse. Nor does it seem to me sufficient, having thus disposed of the falsehood, to put in its place, or to juxtapose, the 'truth'. This will convince only the converted, so long as the 'truth' is not propounded in the exact context and perhaps even translated into the approximate terms of that which it corrects. Dr Dempsey in fact hardly mentions Sartre's themes once he has disposed of them. When St Thomas criticised the Arabs or the Augustinians, he did so from *within* their own thought, showing first its deficiencies and then, as it were, bursting their inadequate confines by the expansion of his own vital thought within their precincts. It is the purpose of this article to suggest that until his followers are somehow able to do the same thing in the setting of the twentieth century the philosophical predicament will remain unsolved.