

METAPHYSICS AND THE WORLD CRISIS

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Several years ago on one of his visits to Toronto, M. Jacques Maritain, when he was informed that I was teaching a course in Metaphysics, turned to me and inquired with an obvious mixture of humor and irony indicated by a twinkle in the eyes: "Are there some students here interested in Metaphysics?" The implication was that he himself was finding fewer and fewer university students with such an interest. The full import of M. Maritain's question did not dawn upon me until later. In fact, only recently did I examine it in a wider context and realize its bearing upon the present world situation.

By a series of causes ranging from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in the 18th century and the rise of Positive Science in the 19th century, to the influence of Pragmatism, Logical Positivism and an absorbing preoccupation with technology in the 20th century, devotion to metaphysical studies has steadily waned in our universities. The fact that today so few voices are raised to deplore this trend is indicative of the desuetude into which Metaphysics has fallen. Indeed, a new school of philosophers, having come to regard the study of *being* as an entirely barren field, has chosen to concern itself with an analysis of the meaning of language. (Volume XXXIV of *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* deals with Analytical Philosophy.) Yet, paradoxically, while an increasing number of scholars seem to be losing serious interest in metaphysical studies, the world crisis we are experiencing today appears to be basically a crisis in Metaphysics.

Our analysts are busy probing the problems which present themselves in the fields of economic, social, and political relationships. I have no argument with this probing itself, which is useful and even necessary; only with its failure to go deep enough. Few people seem to realize that many of these problems are merely symptoms of a disease which lies beneath the surface of these various relationships, namely the breakdown of sound metaphysical thinking.

Living as we do in an age of science, we still cherish the hope that some day, if not in this, then possibly in the next few generations, man will achieve a scientific breakthrough to the ultimate solution of human and world problems. But this hope itself reflects the current contusion about the hierarchy of knowledge which is leading to the substitution of science for metaphysics. In reality there is a vast difference between the true pretensions of these two orders of knowledge.

Science endeavors to analyze physical objects by reducing them to their basic components. Yet these components, be they the elements of chemistry or the electrons and protons of physics, are physical entities always observable, at least by supposition, to sense experience. That is as far as the scientist's analysis purports to go.

The metaphysician, on the other hand, claims to push beyond the strictly observable in his analysis of things. He aims at discovering the absolutely ultimate and most basic

components which are common not to a mere class of entities but to all reality whatsoever, whether material or immaterial. While these ultimate aspects of being do not reveal themselves to the senses as such and are therefore not reducible to terms analyzable by sense experience, they are nevertheless open to investigation by the pure human intelligence.

Philosophers, it is true, have not always agreed in the precise means of arriving at these basic metaphysical constituents of reality, whether by reasoning or by some sort of intuitive process. But the long philosophical tradition, from the time of the ancient Greeks to the present, has steadily maintained that the ultimate and absolutely irreducible constituents of all being are the two metaphysical principles commonly designated by the terms *essence and existence*. Around the recognition and explanation of these two principles has revolved the whole drama of metaphysics down to our day. Today, this drama is being acted out by a few professional philosophers whose influence can be all the more distressing, the closer their speculations touch upon the radical division of being into its ultimate constituents.

Looking back over the centuries' long history of human thought, most philosophers, as Professor Gilson strikingly pointed out a few years ago in his *Being and Some Philosophers*, have more or less taken the existence of things for granted and confined their analyses of reality to that side of it which tells *what* it is, namely *essence*, and which is expressible by a concept or idea in the mind. The fault in this practice is that it reduces philosophy to some sort of logical system of ideas such as is found formulated in the doctrine of Hegel.

In recent years, in fact since the time of Kierkegaard in the last century there has been a reaction against this logical formalism because it tends to neglect the more important aspect of things, namely their existence. This contemporary reaction, as is well known, goes under the name of Existentialism. To Existentialism is due the credit of having created among the philosophers of our day a greater awareness of existence and of its importance in things. It has even made the Thomists go back to the texts of St. Thomas to rediscover his emphasis on the existence aspect of being. Indeed, its impact on invaluable treatises, such as Maritain's *Existence and the Existent*, in which the author applies the term *Existentialism* to the doctrine of St. Thomas, although in a unique, and to Maritain's mind, authentic sense.

But Existentialism as a philosophy, not only fails to do justice to *being*; it actually occupies the opposite extreme to Hegelianism. In fact, when the logical consequences of this exaggerated position are fully accepted, as in the doctrine of Jean Paul Sarte, they become even more terrible and foreboding.

Here is how the metaphysical pendulum has swung. In former times, philosophers were so absorbed in the study of essences that they neglected to take into full account the existences of things. Now, we have philosophers who are so emphatic about the existence of things that, in an effort to give priority to existence, they even suppress or deny essence.

The man on the street may wonder what difference these philosophical speculations really make. I will grant that the disputes among the philosophers about metaphysical abstractions would be quite a harmless game, were it not for the historical fact that they tend seriously to influence the daily lives of men. Their importance appears greater still when one discovers that they can lead to world crises such as we are presently experiencing. Let us try to trace the logic in this discovery.

Supposing that one admits, in accordance with philosophical tradition, that there are in things such primary constitutive principles as *essences* or *natures* which radically determine those things both as to their being and as to their intelligibility, it immediately becomes necessary, in order fully to account for the presences of such essences, to acknowledge the existence of an intelligent and all powerful Cause who placed them there. Sarte recognizes the embarrassment the existentialist suffers from his supposition that God does not exist, since “there disappears with Him all possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven”. (*Existentialism and Humanism*) It would be more correct to say that there disappears with Him all possibility of finding values within things themselves.

If, on one hand, things do not make sense to our minds unless these things possess essences which tell what they are, there is, on the other hand, no intelligible explanation of the source of these essences without the admission of the existence of God. In other words, without god, there can be no essences or natures in things and consequently no intelligible order in the universe and no natural laws based on that order of natures.

The only alternative would be to admit that man himself is the ultimate source of that order and of those essences. That is to say, on the supposition that there is no intelligible order in the universe because there is no God to put it there, it would then be up to man to get to work to create such an order. First however, it would be necessary to destroy whatever semblance of order men now imagine to exist. This is in fact the very crisis the world faces today and that crisis is fundamentally a metaphysical one.

While most men will readily admit that Communism is a serious threat to Western culture and civilization, few seem to discern with clarity where the basic issues really lie. As Christopher Dawson ably points out in this recent book, *The Crisis of Western Education*, and in other of his writings, the spiritual principles which for centuries have vivified the culture of the West are religious principles derived from the Christian Gospel. I should like to add, however, that the rational presuppositions of these religious principles, which also form part and parcel of Western culture, have a broader source than Christian revelation alone. They were already imperfectly grasped by some of the Greek thinkers of old. The idea of a fixed order of natures and of laws based on such natures was adopted by early Christianity and through centuries of Christian speculation intellectually penetrated and developed to the point of universal acceptance in the Western world.

Now, Communism has come along with the proposal and the challenge to destroy this established order of natures and to replace it with a new one. Khrushchev only echoed

the teaching of his predecessors when in 1957 he proclaimed the communists to be “people of positive revolutionary activity” who see their goal as “that of transforming the world, of building the communist society.” (Quoted in *Soviet World Outlook*, Department of State Publication 6836, Washington, D.C., 1959, page 47).

“Transforming the world” as Communism understands it, evidently goes deeper than mere economic or social adjustment; it goes beyond the substitution of state or common ownership of the means of production for private ownership. By an intrinsic necessity of the system, it entails some sort of metaphysical iconoclasm, especially the smashing of the image of God in man, followed not only by a reorganization of economic and social life but also by the adoption of a distinctively different metaphysical and moral perspective. The idea of “eternal, final, immutable ethical laws”, the pretext that “the moral world has its permanent principles” has to be rejected (Engels). Communist morality has to be “entirely subordinated to the interests of the class struggle of the proletariat” (Lenin). The people have to be imbued with a new sense of purpose. As Khrushchev proclaimed four years ago: “The great majority of Soviet citizens live to accumulate more funds for the common cause, for the state, to raise the level of production, economy and science so that even more machines will be made and more grain produced.” And he added: “The capitalist cannot understand our psychology, the psychology of our Soviet man.” (Texts quoted in *Soviet World Outlook*, pp. 68, 69).

The notion of God being eliminated, a new nature must be created for man, and with it a new human density, new laws and new virtues. This denial of the old order of essences and the necessity of creating new ones or at least substitutes or “projects”, since in actual fact man cannot get along without them, is something Communism has in common with Sartre’s version of existentialism, for whom man is “condemned at every instant to invent man” through the sheer exercise of his liberty. But this tampering with essences is a risky business, since it requires the assumption of powers which in reality are the privilege of God.

Without fully realizing what is truly at stake, Western man is being lured into this experiment. No longer enjoying the support to right judgment afforded by a virtual Christian faith, he can hardly count on our present secular culture serving as a bulwark against temptations to test the promises of freedom consubstantial with the abandonment of the traditional metaphysical order. As Dostoevsky once wrote: “If God does not exist, then everything is permitted.”

What is direfully needed therefore, besides a renewal of Christian faith, is some sound metaphysical thinking which will recognize reality as it is and the true scope and limits of its potentialities, especially as regards man and his life in society.

By the very nature of things, this must be mainly the work of philosophers. It will not be accomplished, however, either by an attitude of futility toward metaphysical speculation or by obstinate disputes over the suppression or the priority of essence or existence but in the intelligent and frank acceptance of their unity as primary components of being. Unless philosophers soon get together to take a fresh look at *being* as it truly is, and

through the medium of the schools impart this vision to the masses, the world crisis will probably persist until Communism succeeds in expanding into a world-wide experiment. How long it would take after that for the world to regain its true mental composure can only be a matter of conjecture.

Anyone who agrees with the above analysis will quickly understand the responsibility and the burden which falls upon the shoulders of Catholic colleges and universities. Instead of moving with the academic tide of de-emphasis on metaphysics, the world crisis calls for an effort to stem the tide. Instructors are faced with the urgency of trying to make students more conscious than ever of the basic metaphysical problems and by prudent and courteous dialogue with the staffs and students of non-Catholic schools to spread that interest to other campuses.

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