

Jacques Maritain

His First Lecture on his first visit  
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by  
Fr. Victor B. Brazier OSB

Who was present at the lecture  
which was delivered in French  
and translated into English

Hoping that all students at the Center  
will take the time to read it.

# Lectures on the Theory of Knowledge in St. Thomas

Jacques Maritain

First Lecture\*

## Introductory remarks:

Thanks for words of introduction. Importance of Thomistic philosophy for future of thought. The new world destined to play great part in culture of mind. Its thinking will have a decisive influence on the future. In St. Thomas' philosophy we shall find salvation for the intelligence. That is why I crossed the ocean and braved the hurricane, which, for its violence, gained the publicity of the newspapers.

Thomism is not merely an historical thing, a system of thought, vital only in the past but now interesting merely as an historical phase of human reflection. We must, of course, study it historically in order to know what it was and what it is now. But we should not think of it as a specimen in the museum of thought. On the contrary, its substance and its spirit transcend time, are intemporal like all that is true. We must think of it not only historically but in connection with contemporary problems. In Thomism we shall see the actual, present-day salvation of the intelligence. We stand for a living Thomism, not an archaeological Thomism.

Whence arises a double obligation upon Thomists. First: To defend the stability and permanence of traditional thought against individualism of modern thought and mistaken conception of progress. Individualism destroys the social character of thought and sacrifices the valuable aid of tradition for thought. False progress uproots and rejects the precious legacies of the past and places undue confidence in novelty simply because it is novelty. <sup>1<sup>st</sup></sup> duty – defend thought against progress (as it is understood in the world to-day). Second: To defend the vitality and development of traditional thought against the immobilism of certain scholastics and the rigidity of those who insist upon the “nil innovetur nisi quod traditum est”. The wisdom of St. Thomas is always young. It renews its youth, constantly renovates, rejuvenates itself. It is a growing body, increasing in beauty and perfection from day to day. Second duty: defend thought against fixationists—rigid, stiff traditionalism.

## First duty: Defend thought against Progress.

Man is a social animal because he must learn and he must teach. St. Thomas develops his ideas about teaching in the De Magistro (De Verit. C. XI). The teacher is like the physician. The principle agent in teaching is not the teacher but intelligence. Nature is stable, constant: not perpetually changing. So too tradition, the transmission of knowledge is necessary as the stable basis of learning. To regard knowledge as continually changing is to choose chaos and barbarism.

\*Translated from the original French by an unknown translator. Perhaps Fr. Brezik himself.

Science must be progressive. Its progress is marked by a successive replacement of one thing by another. Horse and wagon—railways—automobiles—airships: Candles—oil lamps—gas—electricity: Ptolemy—Copernicus—Newton—Einstein etc. We are prone to extend this progress to philosophy and the spiritual life as a whole. It was, we are inclined to think the normal thing that mediaeval thought should cede the place to Cartesian thought, Descartes to Kant—Bergson—Heidegger—Soviet philosophy etc..

The modern mind is scandalized that we offer a system identical in structure with Aristotle and St. Thomas. We have a modern type of science, why not of philosophy? This is a preliminary difficulty: an obstacle in the way of fair-minded folk which prevents them from investigating Thomistic thought. They are stopped, as it were, at the very entrance door.

The difficulty is the result of a confusion. The philosopher is not a tailor who must follow the changing styles. There is a confusion of thought in the question: we have a new kind of plumbing, why have we not a new kind of thinking?

There are two types of progress. Correspond somewhat to St. Augustine's ideas of Science and Wisdom. Adopting terminology of Gabriel Marcel, we may say, Every question posited by the mind has a two-fold aspect: There is the aspect of mystery in the object and the aspect of problem in our concept. Descartes' crime was to make mystery the enemy of intelligence by introducing his theory of clear and distinct ideas as the sine qua non of thought. This is of course a vitally important conception for all forms of idealism and every rationalistic theory of clear and distinct ideas. Descartes accepted God but made Him transcendent to thought. Intelligence must not, cannot aim or tend towards Him. Open your eyes upon nature and the universe: shut them to mystery. Faith is blind acceptance; not knowledge or understanding. The acceptance of mystery is therefore not in the line of knowing since from the nature of the case mystery cannot be expressed in clear and distinct ideas. Faith and reason move in different orders, entirely different, and there can be no passage or reciprocal influence from one order to the other.

Mystery, however, should be regarded differently. Descartes' conception of mystery and the mysterious is wrong. Mystery is not the enemy, but the food of intelligence. The very nature of knowledge is enveloped in mystery. To know is to become the other – fieri aliud in quantum aliud: and if ever there was a mystery it is here. How can intelligence remain itself yet become the other? Moreover, the proper object of intelligence is being. Being is itself a mystery. From the point of view of the fullest realization of the concept of being, intelligence is confronted with a reality too rich, too pure to be comprehended: from the opposite point of view, that of the most meagre realization of the concept of being—viz. in matter, potency—the reality is too poor, too weak, too jejune to offer sufficient content for a distinct and clear intelligible idea. Mystery is ontological plenitude; the intelligence must plunge into it, move in its vastness; but it can never hope to exhaust it. Its confines recede as the mind advances towards them until in mystery par excellence—the supernatural—they stretch outward to infinity—et ultra. All this is food for intelligence and on this food it waxes strong, powerful,

penetrating. The mists gradually dissipate but never does the cloud of impenetrable mystery raise nor will it completely disappear until the vision of God fills the intelligence with light.

The problem aspect deals not with the object known but with the adaptation of our concepts in the expression of knowledge. Here we have something of an enigma, a puzzle. It is no longer question of the ontological content of knowledge but rather of the framing of a conceptual system for the adequate representation of reality. There is in this something of the question of Oedipus and the Sphinx. We have to deal with a conceptual knot which one has tied and another must untie and tie again. It is a notional complex created by the intelligence which seems incapable of resolution, denouement by the intelligence.

Both of these aspects are conjointly present in every question. For, 1<sup>st</sup>, every question is a question about being—whence mystery: and 2<sup>nd</sup>, we must conceptualize, we do not know being by an intuitive grasp of its full content—whence problem.

One of the other of these aspects predominates in every question. It depends upon the nature of the question which aspect prevails. The problem aspect prevails where the question is least ontological. The mystery aspect where the ontological character of the question is predominant. Thus in the realm of phenomena, numbers and pure entia rationis the problem aspect is predominant. Here, we have indifference to the reality or unreality of the concepts; it is rather a practical question, a question of technique, such as is presented by science and mathematics. The mystery aspect predominates in metaphysics and theology where the being of the thing, its reality, is the question more than our representation of that reality.

Progress in questions where problem aspect predominates is linear—Progress by substitution. Like the successive views in a landscape. The more these questions realize their epistemological type the more they advance in this fashion.

Progress in questions where mystery aspect predominates is immobile, vehement, vital—by deepening insight. It is a deeper, fuller knowledge of the same which constitutes this progress, not a substitution of one aspect for another. Example:- Reading Holy Scripture, the same is read again and again but there is always a deeper insight. N.B. Progress by deepening insight—development.

In this type of progress (by deepening insight) tradition is most necessary, because it is knowledge of the same, it is a vital growth, the whole grows upon the past and out of it. (Contrast chemical combinations with cellular growth.) Tradition must not be abandoned, else we should not hold to the same; yet tradition must not petrify for progress by deepening insight is intrinsically dynamic, intense and active.

Cfr. Chesterton, *The Victorian Age in Literature*, Chap. 1.

“. . . real development is not leaving things behind, as on a road, but drawing life from them as from a root. Even when we improve we never progress. For

progress, the metaphor from the road, implies a man leaving his home behind him: but improvement means a man exalting the towers and extending the gardens of his home.”

These ideas may be illustrated or commented upon as follows:-

Man has three thirsts:

1. I thirst for the solution of my problem: I seek to adapt, arrange, harmonize and order my concepts so that my thinking may be consistent, inwardly coherent. When I make a discovery I feel my thirst is slaked for the time being: but I get thirsty again for other waters of knowledge, I get curious about other things. This is the Problem Aspect.

2. I thirst to know being—what is, reality. When I know it I am still thirsty but thirsty for a more intimate knowledge of the same—being. “Those who eat of this bread shall still hunger.” Created wisdom does not penetrate Mystery to its depths but by an increasing insight sees more clearly how mysterious being really is. This is the Mystery Aspect.

3. I thirst for the waters of Eternal Life. I yearn to see God—the Word of God, to possess the Wisdom of the Father. This thirst is partially slaked by the Gifts of the Holy Ghost and the Infused Virtues (Theological and Moral) which are the beginnings of eternal Beatitude (Grace blooms into Glory). In the Beatific Vision that thirst will be finally and completely slaked. There will be no more thirst for there will be nothing more to thirst after. This is Beatitude the culmination of all tendencies and efforts after Wisdom and Science.

The second and third of these progressive movements are characterized by increasing intimacy, stability of texture and permanence of doctrinal tradition.

The first type is successive, substitutional, changeable and transitional. The first type progresses in a linear fashion. The second and third progress in spiral fashion.

The height of absurdity is to confuse the first and third types and to make Beatitude equivalent to a Problem. This is to see more in movement than in rest, in becoming than in being, in research than in contemplation. Leibnitz was a victim of this absurdity; he regarded it as a tiresome thing to possess always the same truth; knowledge is a road through unsatisfying bits of information: the search is preferable to the possession. Kant asks why God is not bored by the eternal contemplation of Himself.

It is a disorder to confuse the first and second types of progress. This is the confusion of Philosophy with Science; of Wisdom with Knowledge (Sapientia – Scientia): Progress by substitution with progress by deepening insight.

Confirmation of these ideas:-

1. Relations between Theology and Philosophy

Theology is necessarily stable. (Modernistic evolutionary theory in Theology is heresy). “Heaven and earth shall pass away but my word will not pass away.” Theology is knowledge rooted in faith: not merely human reason (philosophy) applied to revealed data (Cfr. Degres du Savoir p, 500f) Here there can be no substitution. The truths are immutable. Theology uses philosophy. Theology is

free in respect to philosophy and may choose what philosophical conceptions are best adapted for the elucidation of revealed doctrine. Whence it follows that philosophy, be stable. Were it constantly shifting philosophy could not be of service to theology. It would so lose its highest claim to recognition and honour—it would cease to be philosophy. Hence, a Christian thinker grasps and accepts the necessity of stability in philosophical thought more readily than the non-Christian and he sees the reason why; he knows theology and understands that it is a stable and exact science.

There is a danger, however, in this and it is important to see it clearly and to guard against it. The danger consists in confusing two types or kinds of stability, the stability of the Word of God and the stability of first principles in the order of reason and of established conclusions based upon reason. There must be basis, fundamental stability in human thought but it is not the stability of faith. Knowledge by faith is more certain (therefore more stable) than knowledge by natural intelligence. There must be no confusion of philosophy with theology.

2. These ideas have their value for the modern man. Experience demonstrates that modern thinkers have bent their efforts to fuse (we should say confuse) the first two types of progress—the first two thirsts—the problem with the mystery aspects, progress by substitution with progress by deepening insight, science with philosophy.

Descartes denied the possibility of Theology as science, knowledge—faith is blind acceptance—and tried to solve the mystery of being by clear and distinct ideas.

Kant denied the possibility of philosophy as science, knowledge—criticized the very power of reason—and tried to substitute the problem of knowledge (the problem of critique, epistemology) for the problem of being (the metaphysical mystery of the real).

Reason has no longer even the criteria for the recognition of truth.

Leo XIII proclaimed a return to St. Thomas. It was not simply a question of pedagogy, not merely a critical attitude towards existing systems, a matter of discipline. It was a prophetic vision. It was his aim to offer a wisdom to humanity, to reestablish wisdom in a world which, though in intellectual agony had yet a common culture which held it together and should have rendered possible the acceptance of the wisdom upon which that culture rested.

Second Duty: Defend perpetual novelty against Immobilists.

The task which confronted St. Thomas in the 13<sup>th</sup> century was the task which confronts us today. He had to purify thought of foreign excrescences and accretions—to scrape off the rust which had accumulated on the thought which had come down through the ages from St. Augustine. Extraneous influences and currents of thought from foreign sources had polluted the pure stream of Christian thought and rendered it stagnant with incrustations. It had to be purified and cleansed so that it might flow on in a steady stream of pure waters. St. Thomas encountered obstacles to his efforts. Rigid traditionalists opposed his efforts and decried his “novelties”. (Gilson speaks of “hard-boiled theologians!” He had to overcome immobilism.

Today we have the same work to do; the same obstacles to overcome. Our contemporary philosophical “stand-patters” swear by their text-book learning and oppose all “innovations”, as they call honest and enlightened efforts at improvement and development. Let St. Thomas be our pattern! The rigour of principles must be rigidly maintained for this is the condition without which philosophical progress would be an impossibility. Let there be no additions, no substitutions, no novelties. No Neo-Scholasticism! To advocate such a method exposes to the risk of progress by substitution. The “Neo” is liable to devour the “scholasticism”. Development must come from within; it is a vital growth, an auto-

folding, a transfiguration in situ; the same Augustinian thought which passed through St. Thomas must once more be freed from the accumulations of centuries and set free to flow on down through the ages growing and developing as it did in the 13<sup>th</sup> century under the impulse of the Angelic Doctor. Its growth must be a vital growth. When the child grows into adult estate the whole child grows, the whole child is transfigured, the child remains the same person in adult age as he was in youth and in infancy. It is this kind of progress which philosophy grows out of the past and is filled with all that the past has found good and true.

Progress of this sort must go forward in full contact with those around us, those who are other than we are in thought and outlook and whose systems of philosophy are ill founded, adapted only to the vision of an epoch or an age. There is a virtual philosophy in the course of events, a philosophy which is latent, yet real and deep. It progresses beneath the surface of the passing scene and is unformulatable as a whole at any given time; yet it realizes itself progressively when there is a center around which its vicissitudes may cluster. The philosophy of St. Thomas will give continuous expression to that virtual current (or undercurrent) of thought because it is organic. It can assimilate, as every living organism assimilates, the material of its environment and infusing into it a “form”, give it life and development. The philosophy of St. Thomas is destined to actualize, to realize, to accomplish, the progress of philosophy by assimilating to itself the new elements which the passage of time presents. There can be no progress of the substance itself of philosophical thought. Such change would spell destruction. (Recall what Gilson has said of the inevitable destruction of philosophy through the attempt to conceive the universe in an idealistic fashion—the failure of the Cartesian Method as seen in the history of modern thought.) The change will not be one of substance but of mode. Old truths in new dress, new forms of presentation; new perspectives on the same landscape.

Vocabulary: - In line with this conception of philosophical progress achieved in close contact with the historical facts—the changing modes of philosophizing—the Thomist will be naturally led to revise, refresh, renew, recast his vocabulary; the terminology, nomenclature and phraseology of the language in which the doctrines or teachings of St. Thomas are clothed.

The concepts themselves do not change. The same, identical concept may be rediscovered by a different mode, a different approach, from a different angle or point of view. Such differences of mode inevitably involve differences of expression, language, vocabulary.

The ancients had a happy confidence in the spontaneity of intelligence working on and through the sensible. They realized that intelligence had a life of its own on a higher level than that of the material world. They could trust intelligence to deal with sensible reality and express itself in material ways without fearing that it would lose itself in matter and the corporeal. Their intelligence was strong enough to transcend the sensible and penetrate to its very heart where it found intelligibility—reality of intelligible nature. For instance, in seeking a definition of life they could confidently proceed to look for it in motion, without endangering their intelligence, without running the risk of mistaking spatial displacement, local motion, for the principle of spontaneity which is the root of that motion in things that move by vital impulse. They could define life as “motion from within” and call those things “living” or “alive” which “move themselves” without losing sight of the principle from which that motion proceeded. They could proceed more materially because they were more spiritual. We are more material in our way of thinking; therefore we feel the need of a vocabulary which is more spiritual. The tendency of our minds is to spatialize, concretize, materialize even the most spiritual realities. Whence, in order to grasp the spiritual, the immaterial both in itself and as it is latent in the sensible and material world, we require words which will not be obstacles to that spiritual insight but rather aids to our minds,

so materialistically inclined, to transcend the sensible and attain to the intelligible at the very core of things. For this reason terms which have an appearance of greater abstraction (noetic, dianoetic, paranoetic etc.) may prevent the danger of spatially imagining and concretizing what belongs strictly to the order of the intelligible.

A final remark: If the work of the Thomistic philosopher is, as we have indicated, to push forward to fuller growth and development, to progress, yet to preserve unswerving fidelity to tradition, a difficulty immediately presents itself—a difficulty which is unsurmountable so long as the attitude of modern philosophy is retained.

The difficulty may be stated thus: - Philosophy must go forward progressively and if it is truly philosophy—if the philosopher is true to his essence as philosopher—it must suffer no constraint. If necessary, the philosopher should philosophize himself out of all tradition and follow rigorously through to the inexorable end of his philosophical thinking come what may. All considerations outside of the exigencies of philosophical reflection are extraneous to philosophy and destructive of the very essence of philosophy. Whence the restraints of tradition are shackles on philosophy and cannot be tolerated by the true, sincere philosopher.

The difficulty rests upon an idea which, historically speaking, goes back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century but which is never found precisely formulated. This idea is, strictly stated and shorn of all disguise, that a philosopher is not a man but only a philosopher: philosophy replaces nature: the philosopher is the philosopher and nothing else than the philosopher. (Cfr. Maritain, *La philosophie Chretienne* pp. 34-35.)

We are reminded of the fallacy in logic against which both Plato (Sophist) and Aristotle (Organon) protested and upon which they opposed Aristhenes. If it be true that “Koriskos” and “Korikos” above can be predicated of “Koriskos” then it is true that “Koriskos is Koriskos” but there is no justification for saying “Koriskos is a man”. The problem of predication is the same today. “The philosopher is the philosopher”. There is something touching in this attitude, a desire to preserve the purity of the philosophy of mind, a sort of heroic surrender to an ideal regardless of the consequences. Unfortunately it is based upon illusion and logical fallacy. (Dfr. Maritain, *Reflexions sur l’intelligence* pp. 21-22.). “Koriskos” and “man” are the same in the reality, they are diverse in the concept or the notion; “idem re, diversa ratione.” (S.T. Ia.q.13, al2.) But for the moderns nothing must take the place of the habitus of philosophy, not even the nature of man.

The root of the error is in the failure of the moderns to distinguish well between the subject and the object. They would specify habitus by the subject, not by the object. An artist is not a man who makes things well—he is just a maker of things: a philosopher is not a man who philosophizes, he is just a philosophizer. Philosophy devours the philosopher: art devours the artist. Everything must give way before art or philosophy (as the case may be) even the human nature of the artist or philosopher. Philosophy becomes the final end of the philosopher: philosophy demands the damnation of the philosopher: the man must surrender to the thinker. The moderns thus cut off a section of their nature and glorify it so that it becomes the whole and expels all which is not that very section.

The ancients, on the contrary, distinguished well between subject and object. The habitus is not specified by the subject but by the object. Theology, Philosophy, Science differ because of their formal object. One and the same subject—John Smith—may be a theologian, a philosopher and a scientist. He remains the same and retains his whole nature. It is the same man who philosophizes and who prays. He is not divided. From the de jure point of view as well as from the de facto point of view philosophy

must not, cannot, be isolated from life, i.e. human life whole and entire. A philosopher is not a philosopher if he does not pray. (Cfr. Chesterton, "An aetheist and a man were standing on a doorstep.) Otherwise he does not vanquish the antinomies of thought. He does not philosophize as a St. Thomas, for whom tradition was a spur to progress and progress the blooming of tradition.