

Scholasticism and Contemporary Philosophy

AN EDITORIAL

Philosophers, to whom the general public refers as representative of contemporary American thought, seldom mention Scholasticism. When they do, their statements indicate scarcely more than the most superficial understanding and appreciation of its principles — and are usually based on the pre-conviction that Scholastic philosophy is dictated by the doctrine of the Catholic Church, and is used by that body solely to further its apostolic aims.

In most cases it is immediately obvious that for these scholars Scholasticism has merely an historical interest, on a level with the Ontologism of Malebranche, for instance, only slightly less interesting because a few centuries older. In a review for the English quarterly, *Mind*, Mr. A. N. Prior remarks, “. . . Aquinas has a right to be taken at least as seriously as Hegel.” And this by way of concession!

Who is to blame for this unflattering lack of interest in the *philosophia perennis* of whose validity thousands of American students are intellectually convinced? Much of the blame, we must confess, can be laid at the door of those Scholastics who move in a world of their own without making any serious effort to acquaint with Thomistic principles philosophers outside the fold.

This exclusiveness is in great part due to the difficulties inherent in an introduction to Scholasticism. In the first place, there are few professors, outside Catholic universities, capable of effectively introducing the student to the

Scholastic system. This leaves the alternate approach through books and journals, and here too the way is set with discouraging difficulties. The exposition of Scholastic principles is almost invariably couched in a highly technical terminology, and presupposes in its readers a certain mastery of the system.

There are, it is true, some notable exceptions to this rather exclusive attitude. To mention only a few of these, the work of Mr. Adler, M. Maritain, and Étienne Gilson has been recognized and well received by the most exacting critics of “dogmatic” philosophy. Roger W. Holmes says of Maritain in his review of *The Degrees of Knowledge* (*The Philosophical Review*, Vol. XLVIII, No. 5),

To the experience of the reviewer this book is unique. In the first place, here is Neo-Thomism meeting its contemporaries on their own ground, the theory of knowledge. The author sits down with the realist and the idealist and argues with them intelligently and effectively. Here is no hasty dismissal of an opponent, but a willingness to hear the argument and discuss points of contention. Secondly, one is impressed with the profound scholarship of the author, not alone in the intricacies of the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas, but also in the most recent and difficult aspects of mathematics and physics. This man knows the contemporary world. He commands respect.

Here is tangible evidence of what can be done by competent Scholastics who are interested, not only in developing and consolidating their interior forces—which is of primary importance—but also in introducing contemporary thinkers to the vital philosophy of Aquinas.

Book Reviews

A HISTORY OF ESTHETICS

Katharine Everett Gilbert and Helmut Kuhn

The Macmillan Co., New York, 1939, pp. xxii + 582, \$4.25

This book is a careful and scholarly approach to the always precarious task of setting down not what man has done—that is comparatively easy—but what man has been thinking about beauty. Without greatly altering the established plottings, the authors have traced out a rather complete chart of philosophical currents from the sources of our present civilization to the present day.

Plato and Aristotle meet with an unusually understanding treatment, and the remarks about the place of music as the most imitative of the (fine) arts (p. 68) represent an improvement over a good many of the commentaries. The like might be said for the treatment of imitation in general.

Medieval philosophy, under which St. Augustine's work is included, and, more particularly, St. Thomas' philosophy, is valiantly defended against the late Renaissance misunderstandings which still persist in many quarters; but, when we come to modern times, the authors have shut their eyes to the fact that Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Thomas still live. Neo-Scholasticism finds no place in the index, and the single reference under “Scholasticism” refers the reader to the chapter “Medieval Esthetics.” If the authors had taken the care to check the present situation, they would have found that perhaps most of the students in American colleges and universities who are seriously studying philosophy as such are studying Scholasticism! To

make a very low estimate, over 30,000 professional men in America have employed Scholastic philosophy as an integral part of their training, and many more thousands have had some work in it. Well over five hundred universities, colleges, and seminaries are teaching it to their students. Nothing approaching this is true of any other philosophical system or of all of them put together. St. Louis University alone has nearly one hundred students in its graduate school taking ten to fifteen hours of Scholastic philosophy each semester. These figures furnish a background over which play in the aesthetic field such higher lights as Maritain, with his *Art et Scolastique*. Yet poor M. Maritain remains un-indexed, too. A history of aesthetics which completely neglects a contemporary philosophical movement of such size as modern Scholasticism must expect some little criticism.

The authors have tried to write impartially in true historical fashion and have as a rule achieved an unusual degree of success. But in writing of philosophy it is particularly difficult to take one's place precisely nowhere and give a comprehensive view of everything, for even to utter a simple declarative sentence logically places the utterer in a definite philosophical position. The present authors realize this, and so can be pardoned their half-hearted effort to establish their own position in the closing chapter of the book, which ends helplessly with the words, “As Heraclitus said of day and night, they are one.” Beyond a doubt, the authors were more themselves in the realism of Aristotle and Thomas than in this make-believe shadow-land of modern idealism.

WALTER J. ONG.