

# LETTERS

## Neo-Thomism

Sirs:

Dr. Alfred Stern's article on Neo-Thomism in the March issue of *Engineering and Science* is a provocative one—especially to one like the undersigned, who started out in Engineering and finished up in Theology.

Dr. Stern rightly recognizes that Neo-Thomism is a powerful movement in contemporary philosophy. On the campus of one of our great State's Universities "Should Auld Aquinas be forgot . . ." has become a popular song—so I am told. Be that as it may, is it any wonder that vigorous young minds should turn away from the intellectual pessimism which tells them there is no such thing as objective knowledge or certain truth, that the intellect is only an adjusting mechanism, and that since there is no will, freedom is an illusion?

Neo-Thomism is unique today as a harmonious system of philosophy whose theory of knowledge is Critical Realism. It provides extensive proof from pure reason to uphold objective reality of knowledge to support the scientist in the validity of his observations and to defend the data of common sense. It gives a rational foundation for the ideals of democracy as well as the freedom and dignity of the human person, and leads our reason from observations of the world about us to intellectual certainty that the first cause of it all is one infinite and perfect God.

Dr. Stern did not dwell on any of these things in his article. He appeared chiefly concerned with only one department of Philosophy, namely Cosmology or Natural Philosophy. His opinion of Neo-Thomism seems to be dominated by two ideas: First, he thinks this philosophy must be outmoded simply because Aquinas and Aristotle lived so very long ago, and he believes evidently that their disciples today are not permitted to bring them up to date. Second, he thinks Neo-Thomistic philosophy must conform to "dogma" and therefore cannot be based on the free power of thought. These are two prejudices on which I would like to comment.

Dr. Stern asserts, "Almost all of Aristotle's system has been superseded by modern science." Since neither Aristotle nor St. Thomas had

a microscope or telescope—not even a cyclotron—no one would be foolish enough to hold that their knowledge of science would be valid today. They, themselves, would be the first now, as they were in their own age, to accept the latest scientific discoveries. Aristotle indeed, was the principal founder of the scientific method in his "Analytica Posteriora."

Although the application of the scientific method in our times has changed many things, it has not altered human nature nor the parts of philosophy based on human nature, like Ethics. It has made no change in Logic, which is taught today in all the schools as it was first developed by Aristotle in his "Organon." One wonders what scientific discovery could be made to change the mathematical fact that  $2 + 2 = 4$ .

Dr. Stern believes that "Aristotle has been declared sacrosanct" and "to criticize Aristotle has become to be thought almost impious." Apparently he is not aware that many modern Neo-Thomists do criticize Aristotle, and have turned away from his "Hylomorphic" theory to "Hylosystemism," which visualizes matter as an "atomary energy system"—and dispute his politics, which uphold Monarchy as the ideal form of government.

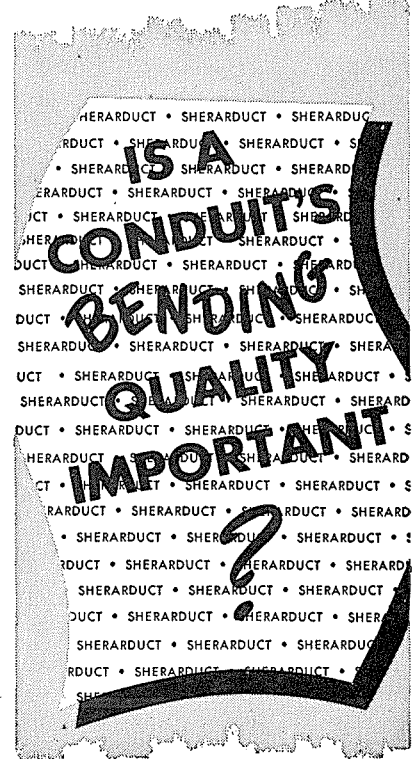
Mr. Stern thinks St. Thomas regarded Aristotle as the "precursor of Christ in the scientific sphere." The fact is that Aquinas warned his pupils that Aristotle was "human and fallible," and he rejected many of Aristotle's ideas; for example, the eternity of time and motion.

Modern Neo-Thomists are likewise free to criticize and disagree with him, and indeed with St. Thomas himself, as the Scotists and the Molinists do. As Eberhardt says, "St. Thomas should be our beacon, not our boundary."

In choosing an example to support his assertions that Neo-Thomism is out of date, Dr. Stern seems to have stumbled. He says: "According to Aristotle, movement is already in the movable body but in a state of potentiality, and fire is potential in the combustible object. These primitive conceptions of Aristotle's physics have been wiped out by modern science." If the Doctor will have the kindness to step over to the Physics Department he will find that potential and kinetic energy are still very much a part of modern physics, and that budding engineers are still busy computing the efficiency of engines

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## LETTERS . . . CONTINUED

on the basis of how well they transfer the potential energy of the fuel into kinetic or actual power. What discovery of modern science has "wiped out" these concepts Dr. Stern does not reveal.

In criticizing Neo-Thomism Dr. Stern seems to confuse philosophy with natural science, and to overlook the fact that they have different points of view and different objectives. A physicist may look at a man and say that he is a prodigious swarm of atoms; a biologist will discern a great system of cells; a philosopher will see a rational animal; and a politician, a vote. They are not contradicting each other, and one does not have to give up his impression in deference to the others. They simply have different objectives and different points of view.

Thus, the scientist may split the atom to get at its physical parts and the philosopher may analyze matter to discern its rational divisions—*matter* that gives it extension and *form* that makes it specific and individual. In this way he can explain how a block of marble is a statue of Apollo and not of a horse, which the physicist can never do on the basis of electrons and protons. So, let Dr. Stern be liberal and leave to philosophy its own autonomy.

Like the savants who wrote before the Twelfth Century, Dr. Stern merges philosophy with physics on the one hand, and with Thomistic theology on the other. He tells his readers that Neo-Thomistic philosophy adopts "dogma," fears "the sin of heresy," builds "on Faith" and "takes revelation for its starting point."

This is obviously the language of Theology and is not to be found in Neo-Thomistic philosophical works. St. Thomas did indeed apply philosophy both to science and to theology

to unfold the significance of their teachings, but he drew a clear and definite line of demarcation between them, basing his philosophy on pure reason and his theology on Divine revelation.

His distinguished disciple, Maritain, writes in *An Introduction to Philosophy*: "It is therefore plain that philosophy and theology are entirely distinct, and that it would be absurd for the philosopher to invoke the authority of revelation . . . the premises of philosophy are self supported and are not derived from those of theology. . . . it is not from its agreement with Faith, but from its own rational evidence that it derives its authority as a philosophy . . . in our arguments and in the very structure of our expositions of philosophy it is not Faith but reason and reason alone which occupies the entire ground and holds undivided sway."

Dr. Stern, however, without giving any references, alleges "Thomas and Neo-Thomists state that no philosophy is legitimate that does not take revelation for its starting point . . . that the declaration of autonomy of philosophy which Thomas had proclaimed was again denied." This he tries to exemplify by claiming that the basis on which St. Thomas founded his contention that the truth of science cannot contradict the truth of Faith is itself an article of Faith; namely, the veracity of God.

Dr. Stern surely cannot be unaware of the fact that Aquinas had provided cogent arguments from principles of pure reason without any appeal to Faith to establish "the veracity of God"—arguments, by the way, which have never been successfully attacked.

If this letter were not already too long I would enjoy commenting on Dr. Stern's remarks about Galileo, who tried to use the Bible as a textbook of science and prove the Copernican theory by revelation (for

which Dr. Stern would also condemn him), and on his attempt to get Maritain into a dispute with Einstein, who never included God and the angels in his theories or tried to claim that this chain of relativity which we call Creation can hang from nothing—like the Fakir's rope, or even compete with the "Strong Man of Ireland" who could lift himself up by the seat of his pants.

Perhaps some day we may pull the loose ends together over our pipes and coffee.

Joseph T. McGucken

AUXILIARY BISHOP OF LOS ANGELES  
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### Dr. Stern Replies:

I AM VERY GRATEFUL to the Most Rev. Bishop McGucken for his comments on my article "Neo-Thomism and Modern Science." He certainly knows Neo-Thomism very well, and this is only natural. For me Neo-Thomism is only *one* philosophy among many others, among which I may choose. For him it is *the* philosophy, the only one he is allowed to adopt, because it had been chosen for him in 1819 by Pope Leo XIII.

I fully agree with Bishop McGucken's supposition that, if alive, Aristotle and St. Thomas would be the first today to accept the latest scientific discoveries. I am also perfectly aware of the fact that the concepts of potential and kinetic energy are widely used in modern physics. Nevertheless, this does not mean that modern physics still thinks that fire is potential in the combustible object nor that "the light is developed out of the heavy . . . for it is only potentially light, but then becomes effectively light," as Aristotle says in his *Physics* (VIII,IV). And there is no doubt that his teleological conception of nature has been "wiped out" by modern science.

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I am glad to learn that Neo-Thomists are allowed to criticize Aristotle. I believe that this is especially true in those respects in which St. Thomas' philosophy disagrees with Aristotle's.

I fully agree with the Most Rev. Bishop McGucken in that reality offers different aspects to the representatives of different sciences. In an essay published years ago in the "Revue de l' Université de Bruxelles" (No. 1, 2, 1939-40) I insisted on this "partitive" character of science and gave as example a piece of marble, defined by the chemist as calcium carbonate and by the archeologist as the Venus of Milo. These two aspects, however, are coordinated, while, according to Maritain, the scientific aspect is subordinated to that of Aristotelian-Thomist philosophy of nature.

This becomes obvious when Maritain writes "The configuration of a body may be a compound of electrons and atoms, but the *essence* is a substantial compound of potency and act," or when he states that "the *authentic* conception of the organism is the animist hylomorphist conception" (*The Degrees of Knowledge*, p. 220, 244). Thus, my contention that Neo-Thomism tries to superimpose upon modern science the concepts of medieval Aristotelian-Thomist science as a pretended higher degree of knowledge has not been refuted by Bishop McGucken's arguments.

The Most Rev. Bishop thinks I should condemn Galileo for having tried to prove the Copernican theory by revelation. I certainly do not, for had Galileo acted in a different way, he would have shared the fate of the philosophers Giordano Bruno and Lucilio Vanini who, a few years before Galileo's process, had been burnt at the stake by the Inquisition, because of the disagreement of their teaching with that of the Church.

I am surprised by Bishop Mc-

Gucken's statement that no change has been made in logic and that "in all schools" it is still taught as it was developed by Aristotle.

The last century has brought about the development of dialectical logic, semantics, mathematical or symbolic logic. Aristotelian logic is hopelessly inadequate for the analysis of mathematical and scientific knowledge. At Caltech symbolic logic is predominantly taught.

In conformity with its title, my article had only to deal with "Neo-Thomism and Modern Science" and had therefore to disregard the other tenets of this philosophy, especially ethics and politics. To meet the reproach of this omission I shall quote two statements of Maritain's, illustrating Neo-Thomist politics and ethics. They read as follows: "Rome is not the *capital* of the Latin world, but of the world. *Urbs caput orbis*" (*Ibid.* p. 21) and "if a Saint abandons her children to receive holy orders . . . if another allows her brother to be murdered at the door of her convent so as not to violate the cloister . . . those acts are *good*, they are the *best* of all *moral* acts" (Maritain, *Courte Traité de l' Existence et de l' Existant*, p. 92-93). I have to confess that I am not very favorably impressed by these political and moral theses.

The Most Rev. Bishop quotes a very liberal sounding passage from Maritain's *An Introduction to Philosophy* in order to refute my contention that Neo-Thomist philosophy must conform with "dogma" and therefore cannot be based on free power of thought. However, Bishop McGucken omits to say that in the same chapter Maritain restricts the freedom of philosophy and science he had granted to such an extent that it is tantamount to its complete denial and total subjection to the rule of the theology. This passage from Maritain's reads as follows:

"As the superior science *theology*

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*judges philosophy* in the same sense that philosophy judges the sciences. It therefore exercises in respect of the latter a function of *guidance or government . . .* which consists in *rejecting as false any philosophic affirmation which contradicts theological truth.* In this sense *theology controls* and exercises jurisdiction over *the conclusions maintained by philosophers.*" (Maritain, *An Introduction to Philosophy*, p. 126)

This is exactly what I said in my article. If Maritain adds that philosophy is subjected to theology "neither in its premises nor in its methods *but in its conclusions*, over which theology exercises its control" (*An Introduction to Philosophy*, p. 132) this is pure casuistry; for how can you arrive at certain conclusions without starting from appropriate premises and still remain logical? This is impossible. Thus, my contention that before they begin to philosophize, the Neo-Thomists already know the conclusions at which they have to arrive, is fully substantiated by the statements of the leading Neo-Thomist Maritain.

The unprejudiced reader will certainly recognize that the contentions of my article have been reinforced rather than shaken by Bishop McGucken's attack.

Alfred Stern

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