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In Pursuit of True Wisdom: How the Re-Emergence of Classical Wonder Should Replace Descartes’s Neo-Averroistic Sophistry

At the heart of many scientific and philosophical debates and discussions today lies a layer underneath that can be missed by our times’ propensity toward mathematical physics. That layer is ultimately a question of what fundamentally is wisdom and science. If we call ourselves “lovers of wisdom”(philosophers/scientists) and what we are doing is the “love of wisdom” (philosophy/science), then, apparently, we would know, and agree on what constitutes that wisdom for which we are in pursuit. This syntopical presentation aims to take a look at the writings and thought of St. Thomas Aquinas in comparison and contrast to the writings and thought of Rene Descartes, who has come to be known as the “Father of modern philosophy.”

In this comparison, it will be shown that the modern concept of wisdom fundamentally diverges with the thinking of Descartes, that, *strictly speaking*, at least in his metaphysical first principles, if not in his chief aim, he may be a sophist, no philosopher at all. It will also be shown that St. Thomas Aquinas anticipated this divergence and gave a defense in his writing against it. It will be concluded with what constitutes real philosophy and science as presented by St. Thomas Aquinas.

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In his work, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, St. Thomas writes concerning wisdom, “Of all human pursuits, the pursuit of wisdom is the more perfect, the more sublime, the more useful, and the more agreeable. The more perfect, because in so far as a man gives himself up to the pursuit of wisdom, to that extent he enjoys already some portion of true happiness.”¹ St. Thomas recognizes that it is in the pursuit of wisdom that man pursues true happiness. This is because, as he mentions in the same work, the lover, or pursuer, of wisdom rightly directs the order of things. A human being who recognizes right order in something must consider that thing’s proper end or aim.

According to St. Thomas, the proper end or aim of something is that for which it is naturally striving to reach its perfection. Therefore, the proper end or aim of anything is its proper good.

It follows then that the proper end or aim of human wisdom is all good, which would end in true happiness for man, because man’s true end and aim is happiness. Any philosophy or science so called that does not direct its aims toward good, or true, human happiness cannot rightly be called *wisdom*. For, just as we would hardly call someone who used the medical arts to end human life as opposed to promote it a health professional, we ought to be just as discerning in what we call *true wisdom*.

According to St. Thomas, a human being who seeks to pursue true wisdom must start in the following way: “That they seek to escape from ignorance is made clear from the fact that those who first philosophized and who now philosophize did so from wonder about some cause.”² St. Thomas recognized that wonder essentially motivated the

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, 2, trans. Joseph Rickaby, S.J. (London: Burns and Oates, 1905). Available online—see the section *References* for details.

² St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, I, 3, trans. John P. Rowan (Chicago: Regnery, 1964). Available online—see the section *References* for details.

first philosophers and motivates all philosophers throughout all time. Those who rightly philosophize perceive some event, or effect, and seek to relieve a personal perplexity, ignorance, that arises from lack of understanding of the cause of that event.

St Thomas and Aristotle had recognized that, in a way (analogously), even the early Greek poets were *philosophers* because they perceived effects, and even though they theomorphized them, they sought to discover the causes to remove their ignorance. Later philosophers only needed to understand more precisely the true nature of these causes, not change the method, habit of discovering causes, or deny their reality altogether.

For St. Thomas, wisdom necessarily assumes that we are: (1) receiving some accurate information from our sense perception, and (2) able to apprehend the cause of effects. It takes for granted that those causes are apprehensible by us, not outside of the ability of human understanding and not, as some have claimed, lying only in God's knowledge, or others have said, unknown entirely to the nature of human understanding. A crucial point to recognize regarding the true starting point of philosophical activity.

Through our intellectual de-materializing, or abstracting, ability related to our sense perception, every psychologically-healthy human being has the natural ability to perceive real effects and determine true causes. As the Latin saying goes, *Nihil est in intellectu quod non sit prius in sensu* ("Nothing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses").

Philosophy's history from the ancient Greeks to the Rene Descartes is a fascinating topic, and one that is beyond the purview of this presentation. Sufficient here is for me to mention Peter A. Redpath's work, *Cartesian Nightmare: An Introduction to Transcendental Sophistry*. In this work Redpath presents a compelling argument that, *strictly speaking*, what Descartes was presenting at the time was not the first

birth of true philosophy. It was really a new species of sophistry, a product, and continuation, of the influence on him of Italian renaissance humanism (rhetoric) and what he had considered to be a Jesuit education too much focused on the trivium as if it had comprised the whole of worthwhile knowledge, philosophy.³

While Descartes's reactions against philosophy thus understood might not have been against philosophy *per se* as understood by the ancient Greeks, or a proper understanding of St. Thomas teaching about philosophy's nature (but a reaction against a prevailing misunderstanding of these at the time), for us to note it suffices for a main aim of this paper: to show that Descartes's method did not initiate a true understanding of philosophy, wisdom. It created a new kind of sophistry.

In his *Discourse on the Method*, Descartes provides his reaction to what he understood to be philosophy,

Of philosophy I will say nothing, except that when I saw that it had been cultivated for many ages by the most distinguished men, and that yet there is not a single matter within its sphere which is not still in dispute, and nothing, therefore, which is above doubt, I did not presume to anticipate that my success would be greater in it than that of others; and further, when I considered the number of conflicting opinions touching a single matter that may be upheld by learned men, while there can be but one true, I reckoned as well-nigh false all that was only probable.⁴

As can be seen in the preceding passage, young Descartes's attitude toward philosophy as he understood it at the time (as a kind of sophistry) is extremely negative. He perceives that, while philosophy has been studied for many centuries by many distinguished individuals,

³ Peter A. Redpath, *Cartesian Nightmare: An Introduction to Transcendental Sophistry* (Amsterdam–Atlanta, GA: Rodopi B.V., 1997), 81.

⁴ Rene Descartes, *A Discourse on Method*, trans. John Veitch (Project Gutenberg, 2008; ebook edition), loc. 92.

no perceived consensus has been reached among these individuals about what constitutes true philosophy.

Normal is for human beings, sometimes, to express feelings of frustration at a lack of *universal* agreement about a solution of a complex problem; but to use that frustration as a test for the method's veracity is a different matter. To base any test of veracity on universal assent or agreement itself appears dubious. Nonetheless, at this juncture, Descartes claims to say farewell to the philosophy, or sophistry, of his time as if it represented the whole of philosophy as those prior to him had understood and practiced philosophy.

Why he thinks that, by (1) removing himself from the present conversation as if it constituted the whole of the historical discussion prior to him and his time and (2) creating a "new system" is not also another understanding of philosophy about which people will agree and disagree is, also, something he does not explain. It is difficult for an impartial observer not to assume he is asking for special pleading of his Method.

Whatever the case, this move will prove to be a short-term, Pyrrhic victory for him, at best. Essentially based upon a flawed understanding of human nature as one of his first principles, Descartes will initiate a new form of cultural psychology and misunderstanding of philosophy/science still being felt today in all our modern institutions of intellectual learning and culture.

Immediately after expressing his opinion about the pathetic condition of philosophy in his time as he understood it, he provides this opinion about science, "As to the other sciences, inasmuch as these borrow their principles from philosophy, I judged that no solid superstructures could be reared on foundations so infirm."⁵ So, in addition to eliminating from consideration philosophy (which Descartes appears to

⁵ *Ibid.*, loc. 93.

be conflating with metaphysics, what for centuries prior to him, following Aristotle, university professors and their students in the West had called “first philosophy”), apparently recognizing philosophy (metaphysics) to be the source of other species of philosophical/scientific understanding, Descartes chose to ignore these other “sciences” as well.

This move appears to have been an intentional casting into doubt of a main assumption in the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas and the leading ancient Greek philosophers, especially Aristotle, as they had understood the correspondence to reality of our sense perceptions and the hierarchical order of our knowledge from first principles *known to us*, in chronologically-first order through the senses and later (as we ascend from sensory effects to higher causes), eventually known in light of metaphysical first principles.

Considered in themselves as more perfect in being, according to Aristotle and St. Thomas, these metaphysical first principles and immaterial causes are the qualitatively highest of knowable beings and qualitatively widest and deepest of causes. Nonetheless, our first apprehension of them in and through sense perception is weak and remote. Only analogously did Aristotle and Aquinas speak of principles and causes in the lower sciences.

In setting the stage for his method where he will say we can no longer start discovery with trust in the information from our sense perceptions, Descartes unwittingly cut himself off from centuries of previous thinking on the subject. In so doing, he had eliminated the route to immaterial, metaphysical first principles, causes from abstraction of sense perceptions; and to a proper understanding of classical philosophy; and especially metaphysics and how it relates to other divisions of philosophy/science.

Before going any further into the cave of doubt started by Descartes, helpful, at this point, is to consider how St. Thomas had understood order and science because doing so now will allow me later in

this paper to make a proper comparison between the teachings of Aquinas and Descartes about the nature of philosophy/science.

Toward the start of his *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle*, Thomas states, “It is the business of the wise man to order. The reason for this is that wisdom is the most powerful perfection of reason whose characteristic is to know order. Even if the sensitive powers know some things absolutely, nevertheless to know the order of one thing to another is exclusively the work of intellect or reason.”⁶

As it has been discussed already, for ancient Greeks and Aquinas, philosophy consists mainly in discovery of the causes of effects, the discovery of first principles. In addition, to some extent, it involves discovery of how, once we know them, to apply first principles, causes, to generate effects.

We discover those causes by ordering of the intellect and the relationship of effects to causes and causes to other causes and effects. While our senses might produce some true image that initiates this discovery, dematerializing, ordering, and judging is a product of our unique human intellect. No other creatures possess this power; and even within us this power is used in degrees. Hence, the reason some people are wiser than others.

Thomas continues,

Now a twofold order is found in things. One kind is that of parts of a totality, that is a group, among themselves, as the parts of a house are mutually ordered to each other. The second is that of things to an end. This order is of greater importance than the first. For, as the Philosopher says . . . the order of the parts of an

⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. 1, L. 1, trans. C. I. Litzinger, O.P. (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1964). Available online—see the section *References* for details.

army among themselves exists because of the order of the whole army to the commander.⁷

Here lies a crucial understanding of the approach of St. Thomas to wisdom and philosophy/science. In things, composite wholes, an order of parts to a whole exists. The example he provides is of parts of a house mutually ordered. These parts must have unequal possession of the whole: the house. For example, the foundation will be unlike the framing, the framing unlike the insulation, the insulation unlike the roofing, and so on. But we can say these many parts are all one, albeit unequally, in possession of the whole, or genus, of being of the house.

This is not, as some people are known to say, that the whole of a thing is the sum of the parts. On the contrary, the whole, or real genus, unifies the parts of a whole by a measure or limit of having parts. By their sum, the parts do not produce the whole of which they are parts. How could they? None of them is the whole in itself and the juxtaposition of them does not necessarily make a unified whole.

Given our example, someone might imagine the parts arranged in such a way as to have the same shape of a “house;” but were it to be used as a barbershop, is it still a house? The parts did not make the whole. The whole makes this “house” a place of business.

Another example offered by Aristotle is of a human and a corpse. When the body is ensouled, it is a one unified human person. But when the soul has left the body, the whole has changed. It is no longer qualitatively the same organization. No longer is it a human person. It is a corpse, a soulless body.

While a corpse might carry some moral dignities and rights, most human beings would not say it is the qualitatively same whole as that of a fully-ensouled human person. And so it is the measure of the whole

⁷ *Ibid.*

that has a unifying and limiting factor making a one unified thing out of a multitude of parts.

The concept of unity and plurality is crucial to St. Thomas's understanding of order. In *A Not-So-Elementary Christian Metaphysics*, Redpath explains precisely why:

The one is undivided, does not possess, is deprived of, division, and is the opposite of division or plurality. Plurality, not number, is the first-conceived opposite of unity and the ground of all division and difference. Hence, Aquinas maintained, we derive the idea of unity from the idea "of order or lack of division." The concept of unity entails, depends upon, negation and privation (species of opposition) for its intelligibility.⁸

This may turn an uncritical understanding of unity of some readers on its head. What is being said immediately above is that unity is not primarily number. We do not first conceive of, know, find a one because some whole is one in number. We find a one because some continuum body qualitatively resists division into a plurality.

This might appear to be a semantic backflip, but its truth can be seen when we press a little passed our first, broad and confused, sensory grasp of things and perceive how a thing is first understood as one.

All unities are a negation of plurality. This group of unrelated men becomes one army by the lack of division into unrelated parts by the unity provided by a real genus (whole) comprised of the parts and purpose ordered to the whole by the aim of a highest commander. This one man Socrates lacks division into corpse and disembodied soul when he is united as one in nature and substance in a real genus (organizational whole) and species of man whose chief organizational aim is happiness.

⁸ Peter A. Redpath, *A Not-So-Elementary Christian Metaphysics* (St. Louis, MO: En Route Books and Media, 2015; kindle edition), loc. 2624.

Because breaking a composite, organizational, whole into its essentially constituent parts is the way we human beings first know everything, this concept (unity as understood as a lack of, resistance to, division, or breakability, into plurality) as understood by St. Thomas is crucial to understanding the nature of all philosophy/science, and especially how Aquinas and Aristotle had understood these.

No wonder, then, that St. Thomas says understanding the end of a whole is the most crucial principle to grasp in order to know how any finite being is ordered, or organized. For example, squads, platoons, and companies or even the Army, Navy, and Air Force, are all ordered to each other inasmuch as they are ordered to a chief organizational aim or purpose through a highest commander.

Without the aim of the highest commander, the highest in the genus unifying the parts to a common goal or aim, the parts have no organizational unity. Again, the sum of the platoons does not constitute an army. The commander unites an army to the platoons for the goal of militaristic success.

If we consider the house example, the parts are ordered to the whole of a house so that a house is ordered to its aim as a shelter for a person or family. Change the chief aim, say from a shelter to family to a storage facility, or place of business, and now (without affecting a single part individually or specifically), you have fundamentally changed the thing by changing its genus, or organizational unity.

Understanding this concept we can continue with St. Thomas,

Now order is related to reason in a fourfold way. There is one order that reason does not establish but only beholds, such is the order of things in nature. There is a second order that reason establishes in its own act of considerations, for example, when it arranges its concepts among themselves, and the signs of concept as well, because words express the meanings of the concepts. There is a third order that reason in deliberating establishes in the operations of the will. There is a fourth order that reason in plan-

ning establishes in the external things which it causes, such as a chest and a house.⁹

In the above examples, the house and the military, order was discussed as St. Thomas expressed in the fourth order he gives: planning established in external things by a human agent. But philosophy/science chiefly considers things of the highest, or first, order, things not established (humanly caused, produced: products), but contemplatively beheld, such as things in nature.

Yet we still understand these products, like manufactured items, as they pertain to unity, privation and possession: the parts to the whole, or the one to the many. In things found in physical nature lies the ability for possession of contrary opposite parts. Some numerically one thing can actually or possibly possess a multitude of potentially contrary opposite qualities, causes, and activities. A person may be hot or cold, sick or healthy, white or black; but, still, the one person possesses the contrary opposites.

In order to possess these contrary opposites, some substance (organizational whole) must underlie, cause, generate, the opposites and be that in which these contraries inhere: some real cause that unifies proximate, *per se* effects or *per se* accidents into an organizational whole. Some real substance, organization, must exist, unifying the *per se* accidents to produce numerically-one unified, organizational whole.

These essential accidents (properties) are ordered to the substance, such as we find existing in the physical universe around us, which we behold and do not create. As an example, numerically-one tree, although consisting of its multitude of parts (bark, leaves, roots, cells, chlorophyll) possesses an internal, harmoniously-generated unity of parts: a limit, or measure of its existence as a tree identified by its lack of division of these parts.

⁹ Aquinas, *Commentary on Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. 1, L. 1.

Numerically-one tree possesses the real genus of tree, its associated effects; and, by its specificity and by the human intellect, we are able to understand and comprehend a united-one-thing composed of many unequal parts (an organizational whole, or substance) working together for a common aim.

It has already been discussed that, in his *Discourse on the Method* (which he appears to have conceived as an organizational whole), Descartes had expressed negative opinions about philosophy/science as he understood its nature to be existing during his time. Within that work, he had laid out (ordered, organized) a seemingly careful plan to remove all those “ancient, archaic, unhelpful” ideas and methods from his mind and method so as to be open for entirely and immediately true knowledge.

Further, trying to approach their methods with an “open mind,” he decided even physically to remove himself from the environment and travel so as to experience other cultures and the ideas of different lands. After a decade or so of operating as the cultural observer, he sat down in a cabin in Germany and began more exactly to contemplate his method. It is not intended to cover all the steps of his method—only those as allow us a good comparison to St. Thomas in understanding how they differ in each approach to order, perception, and wisdom.

In Descartes’s own words,

It is sometimes necessary to adopt, as if above doubt, opinions which we discern to be highly uncertain . . . but as I then desired to give my attention solely to the search after truth, I thought that a procedure exactly the opposite was called for, and that I ought to reject as absolutely false all opinions in regard to which I could suppose the least ground for doubt, in order to ascertain whether after that there remained aught in my belief that was wholly indubitable.¹⁰

¹⁰ Descartes, *A Discourse on Method*, loc. 355.

Notice this is not Descartes saying he will exercise a kind of extreme caution in the judgment of the intellect about what the senses perceive. That kind of approach might be warranted in treading on new scientific territory or discovery.

This is the mistaken assumption some people today attribute to the Cartesian doubt to bolster Descartes's flawed method as a good philosophical system. They might claim that Descartes is simply being a "good scientist," or a "good skeptic:" not hastily making judgments or forcing a hypothesis to a predetermined conclusion.

It is not a proper understanding of Descartes's own words. Descartes is saying that anything not absolutely certain (and we have not yet received his definition of certainty) or, at least, anything that is not absolutely certain to Descartes, he will reject as if it were false.

Descartes has entirely changed the name of the game. Historically prior to him, wisdom was (and, properly understood, still is) the satisfaction of wonder in the pursuit of knowledge of causes from sensory effects, as we read in St. Thomas. On the contrary, Descartes maintains that no sensory effects can be used as a starting point for philosophical/scientific activity.

He severs the lifeline to wisdom, to sense wonder, and to first, or any, causes. Unless we start already with certain, indubitable, knowledge about the whole of a thing, we will start with a false attribution. *Wisdom, for Descartes, does not start in sense wonder, does not chiefly aim at satisfying wonder about causes of effects. It does not even start with truth tables or truth values. Anything with any imaginable, apparent, doubt associated to it, no matter how small, equals False. If and only if absolutely no imaginable doubt exists will that item equal True.*

The cultural, civilizational, consequences of this move are great. No longer is pursuit of wisdom the pursuit of right understanding of causes of real effects. For Descartes, sense reality becomes known by a kind of mathematical logic. If a thing is clearly and distinctly (mathe-

matically, as he will argue about physical things) true, then it is true in all cases related to sense reality.

If something is not clearly and distinctly true then it is false in all such cases. While this may appeal to some who appreciate mathematical precision, this method has a difficult time corresponding even to physical reality, much less to moral and political ones; and even Descartes recognized this in his own time, as we will see later he will need God to make his system intelligible.

Descartes continues,

Accordingly, seeing that our senses sometimes deceive us, I was willing to suppose that there existed nothing really such as they presented to us; and because some men err in reasoning, and fall into paralogism, even on the simplest matters of geometry, I, convinced that I was as open to error as any other, rejected as false all the reasonings I had hitherto taken for demonstrations; and finally, when I considered that the very same thoughts (presentations) which we experience when awake may also be experiences when we are asleep, while there is at that time not one of them true, I supposed that all the objects (presentations) that had ever entered into my mind when awake, had in them no more truth than the illusions of my dreams.¹¹

An ancient Greek axiom that St. Thomas had adopted, translated as “Nothing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses,” shows the striking and dramatic shift of the first example here in Descartes’s new method. Because our senses sometimes deceive us, he is willing to throw out all experience and all knowledge that may come via sense perception. This begins to reveal some of the framework of Descartes’s new method.

If, as St. Thomas would understand, intellectual knowledge does not first enter by the senses, the sensory data amalgamated into a phan-

¹¹ *Ibid.*

tasm by the imagination (and abstracted by the agent intellect), then the only other alternative is that the intellectual apprehension of something must have some direct access, some uninhibited avenue or path to the intellect. If this is true, as we will later see, this has striking consequences for the nature of man, the body, the physical world, knowledge, and essentially all reality.

Before understanding the consequences, need exists to consider the next item of Descartes's doubt. After doubting the senses, Descartes does not stop. He continues to doubt any judgments he may have made, such as those that he may have erred about in geometry. He even calls into question any thought at all, since he has had some thoughts that appeared to be very real that turned out to be just the workings of a dream.

Initially, concerning the doubts of judgment, such as those attributed to errors in geometry, Descartes calls into question the first order spoken about above in the writings of St. Thomas of which man beholds order in the nature of things. For if we have already cast into doubt our sense perceptions, then those abstracted concepts from the phantasms, such as mathematical and geometrical truths, or true causes of apparently true effects, cannot also be trusted.

Descartes increasingly moves further and further away from the ancient Greek concept of wisdom, satisfaction of wonder at the cause of the sensory effects of things. Finally, as he calls into question every sensory appearance, since even some things appear to be very real even in dreams, Descartes goes all the way to casting doubt on the intellect itself, or at least the intellect as understood by ancient wisdom. For, if our senses are in doubt, and the judgments made by the imagination and the concepts abstracted by the imagination, then nothing abstracted by the intellect can provide anything to science and wisdom.

Having systematically dismantled the ancient view of wisdom, what does Descartes offer as an alternative? Following the quotation above, Descartes says,

But immediately upon this I observed that, whilst I thus wished to think that all was false, it was absolutely necessary that I, who thus thought, should be somewhat; and as I observed that this truth, I think, therefore I am (*COGITO ERGO SUM*), was so certain and of such evidence that no ground of doubt, however extravagant, could be alleged by the sceptics capable of shaking it, I concluded that I might, without scruple, accept it as the first principle of the philosophy of which I was in search.¹²

In an age of an overemphasis on mathematics and efficient causes, to accept this discovery of his as what he claims it to be may be tempting: a solid and sure foundation, an indubitable, irrefutable, first principle of wisdom. But his new-found first principle eliminates the possibility of possession of all other first principles known by science/wisdom and replaces it with a kind of extreme of *Plato's Cave*, where the person released from the chains, turns to the light, and finds out that no outside light had ever existed to begin with. All that person ever was, was a cave-dwelling thinking thing.

The cave and all the impressions are, and always have been, his true surroundings. The cave is just like a boat to a sailor, a vehicle of locomotion for the intellect within which to move, surroundings not truly one with the person. Descartes's new metaphysical foundation firmly and definitively reduces man from a composite of body and soul to a thinking thing only, a separated substance, inexplicably tied to a body, if we can even trust that the body is real.

We can further understand Descartes's thinking on this from an example he gives of wax in his other famous work, *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

¹² *Ibid.*

Let us take, for example, this piece of wax: it has been taken quite freshly from the hive, and it has not yet lost the sweetness of the honey which it contains; it still retains somewhat of the odour of the flowers from which it has been culled; its colour, its figure, its size are apparent; it is hard, cold, easily handled, and if you strike it with the finger, it will emit a sound. Finally all the things which are requisite to cause us distinctly to recognize a body, are met with in it. But notice that while I speak and approach the fire what remained of the taste is exhaled, the smell evaporates, the colour alters, the figure is destroyed, the size increases, it becomes liquid, it heats, scarcely can one handle it, and when one strikes it, no sound is emitted. Does the same wax remain after this change? We must confess that it remains; none would judge otherwise.¹³

Above, when discussing his *Discourse on the Method*, to avoid any possible error, no matter how small, Descartes was willing to jettison any possible truth associated with perception. But here, in the *Meditations*, he is capable of purporting great error because of this approach.

At least two mistakes can be perceived in his statement concerning the wax above that especially relate to our comparison to the writings of St. Thomas. First, since he has removed himself from the method of wisdom found in ancient philosophy, he is essentially unable to recognize how a many can be united in a unity, that numerically-one thing can possess contrary opposite things, can be a composite, or organizational, whole. Such being the case, how this same wax can be both cold and hot, hard and viscous, obtain and lose smell?

The substance, the organizational whole, that is, the wax is what unites the *per se* accidents and maintains the organizational unity of the thing among the qualitatively different, possible contrary opposite con-

¹³ Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), 11. Available online—see the section *References* for details.

figurations. Without confusing the different circumstances with errors in our perception, the wax in the first set of conditions can, indeed, be the same wax in the second set of conditions. As a thing, organizational whole, undergoes change, such as the growth of a child to an adult, the one person remains while vastly different accidental changes occur, because the substance (organizational whole) is what unites the contrary opposites in the thing.

Secondly, if Descartes does not first recognize the substance of a thing (it being an organizational whole united by organizational parts in organizational relations), then he cannot recognize when the substance changes. Just as the earlier example of the man and the corpse, a fully alive person, after having undergone the removal of the soul (death), a corpse remains that is of a qualitatively different substance (qualitatively different organizational whole) than the original man. Or, take the other famous ancient example of the burned log. A wooden log, when exposed to fire and burned, undergoes a substantial change where the log is no longer a log, but becomes ash. The log no longer remains, but is changed to such an extent that it becomes a new substance (organizational whole).

So, some would disagree with Descartes when he says “none would judge otherwise.” Yes, some would correctly judge otherwise. I do! The understanding of true wisdom leads some people to true judgments of true unity.

The question that someone may reasonably ask at this point is whether anything truly and complete new exists under the Sun? Is Descartes’s new method truly new, or is it something old re-packaged for a new time?

A case can be made that Descartes shares many similarities with an Averroistic understanding of the soul. If this is accurate, we end up with a sort of neo-Averroism in Descartes. Let us return to the writings of St. Thomas to further investigate whether there is some credibility to

this argument. In his writing *De unitate intellectus contra Averroistas*, Thomas says,

Averroes held that the principle of understanding which is called the possible intellect is not a soul or a part of the soul, except equivocally; rather, it is a separated substance. He said that the separate substance's understanding is mine or yours insofar as possible intellect is joined to me or you through the phantasms which are in me and you. He says that comes about in this way: the intelligible species which becomes one with the possible intellect as its form and act has two subjects, one those phantasms, the other the possible intellect. Therefore the possible intellect is continuous with us through its form by way of phantasms, and thus when the possible intellect understands, this man understands.¹⁴

Here in the Averroistic position we see an analogue of Descartes's "thinking thing." Averroes, as we understand from St. Thomas, held the possible intellect to be a separated substance. This means the true understanding of the person, how numerically-one human being really comes to know a thing, is truly separate from the body/soul composite. Does this sound familiar? Although it appears that perhaps Averroes did not go so far as to deny that the body is needed as a part of the human person as did Descartes, striking similarities appear to exist between the teachings of Averroes and Descartes regarding the method described whereby true apprehension of knowledge is achieved: our knowledge truly subsists in a possible intellect that is a substance separate from the individual human body.

A challenge for Averroes and Descartes alike is that they want and need some method for this separateness of soul, or intellect, to bridge the gap of individual physical and sense experience. For, as in-

¹⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas, *De unitate intellectus contra Averroistas*, Ch. 3, n. 66. Available online—see the section *References* for details.

dividual human beings, we appear to experience, as numerically-one, body/soul composite physical things existing in the external world.

Averroes tries to bridge that gap by use of the phantasms existing in the sensory human imagination, a faculty other than the human intellect. He says the phantasms unite this separated substance to this person's understanding. Later, Descartes will say that any clear and distinct idea presented directly to the thinking thing without any distractions of the senses will be what man truly understands. In other words, a kind of direct phantasm presented to the thinking thing unites the separated substance to this person's understanding. While not exactly the same, the similarities of their position is enough that a defense against Averroes may prove profitable as a defense against Descartes.

What, then, was St. Thomas's response to Averroes? St. Thomas initially offered three replies to the Averroist position. His second one presents the most trouble for Descartes's new "philosophical" method. As a result, this is the one that is focused on in this paper. It reads,

If then the intelligible species is the form of possible intellect only insofar as it is abstracted from phantasms, it follows that [possible intellect] is not united with phantasms through the intelligible species but rather is separated from them. Unless perhaps it is said that the possible intellect is one with phantasms in the way in which the mirror is one with the man whose image is reflected in the mirror; but such a union manifestly does not suffice for the union of the act. For it is obvious that the act of the mirror, which is to represent, is not on this account attributed to the man. No more could the action of possible intellect on the basis of the foregoing conjunction be attributed to this man Socrates in order that this man might understand.¹⁵

In his response, St. Thomas says that union of knower and thing known cannot provide an actual and essential union if it is only "known"

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Ch. 3, n. 65.

by the knower via the action of a separated intellect (which does the knowing) on the human imagination. He gives the example of a union like that of a mirror, the image of a man in the mirror represents, is not truly one with, the man. No matter how exact and clear the representation, the mirror cannot and will not be one with the man. Actually to be a knower, a human being must actually be one with the thing known, not with a likeness of it (phantasm) generated by a non-human intellect within the human imagination.

So, if the substances are separated (are not essentially united, essentially constituting one organizational, knowing/known whole), the image caused to exist as a phantasm in the human imagination cannot be in the man as causing knowledge. To try another analogy, if cargo is in the boat, a sailor does not truly possess it in the same way he possesses sight of the cargo. Does he not truly possess in a more real way in his person the image created by the sensory experience of sight of the cargo than the cargo itself. In other words, if the thing is separate, not united as an internal part of its organizational being with something else that its organizational being causes to be organizationally one with it, difficult, if not impossible, is to say how they can be organizationally united.

Later, Descartes will have a similar struggle. After defining man as truly a thinking thing, how, then, can anything physical, any sense perception, be trusted as representing a truly real thing?

Ultimately, Descartes will take a route not taken before in the history of philosophy and sophistry. He will use the existence of God to bridge the gap of trustworthiness of the physical. As his argument goes, his imperfection leads him to think that something wholly perfect must exist to account for the existence of something imperfect like himself. For if he were perfect and the only thing existing, he might have created himself to be different, very much more capable, and less limited.

But he finds himself in the unhappy state of not being perfect nor capable of such powers.

Were something to exist more perfect than he, no deception could exist in that thing. For the most perfect thing is the good, and deception is the opposite of the good. Therefore, this perfect being (God) would not deceive; for deception is an imperfection.

Now knowing that God exists, and he has created Descartes as this thinking thing, God would certainly not deceive Descartes in the impressions that are so clearly and distinctly understood by his mind and senses. And so, despite being a separated substance, his sensory experiences are justified via the existence and trustworthiness of God. While Averroes attempts to bridge the gap of intelligibility by the separated possible intellect acting on Descartes's imagination to produce a phantasm in it, Descartes uses clear and distinct ideas from God as the bridge, thinking he has achieved his grounds for all future philosophy. And so, despite many striking similarities, we see there are also some differences between Averroes and Descartes.

In defending against the idea of a human intellect as a separated substance, St. Thomas, goes a step further and shows that, if we consider numerically-one person, Socrates, as though Socrates is a sailor driving a boat, we will not be able to escape the incoherency of the position.

But if you should say that Socrates is not some one thing absolutely, but one by the coming together of mover and moved, many incoherencies follow. First, indeed, that since anything is one in the manner in which it exists, it would follow that Socrates is not a being and does not belong in a species or genus; and further, that he would have no action, because only beings act. Hence we do not say that understanding the sailor is the grasp of the whole made up of sailor and boat, but of sailor alone; similarly, understanding would not be Socrates's activity, but only that of the intellect using the body of Socrates. The action of a

part is the action of the whole only when the whole is one being. Anyone who says otherwise speaks improperly.¹⁶

In the first place St. Thomas considers our understanding of all things in existence being in the organizational unity of the thing, composite whole. If Socrates exists as a some, numerically-one, separate thing like a soul or separated substance, in locational attachment to the body (but not as intrinsically one as part of a human being's organizational nature), then no way exists to say that he is, indeed, a composite, or organizational whole. And, if he is not a composite whole, he would not have a true genus or species. If he has no true genus or species, then he is not really a composite being.

The example of the sailor provided is a classic, but helpful, analogy to understand this concept. When we want to grasp the sailor as a whole, we do not grasp the sailor and the boat. We comprehend the sailor alone. The boat is accidental, incidental, to the sailor as it pertains to the understanding of the sailor as this one human being. The parallel Thomas is making is that, when we want to grasp the man Socrates as Socrates, we have to do so as one composite whole. Socrates, not Socrates as body and Socrates as soul, or sailor and boat. The body is not, and cannot be, accidental to Socrates, if we are to understand Socrates as a composite whole.

As Thomas says, the action of the part can only be the action of the whole when the whole is one being. Descartes's new method, and that of Averroes, made man, the human being, into two things inexplicably in synchronization in their actions. Thus, this method leads to the question: why have a body at all, if it is only incidental to our true nature? Why fear or discourage separation of the body and soul (death), if man's true nature is to be separated from the body? These and many

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Ch. 3, n. 69.

more questions arise when we do not consider man as a composite whole.

Still later, St. Thomas explains that an act of an instrument is not in the thing, but is in the subject.

Second, because the proper act of the mover is attributed neither to the instrument nor to the moved. On the contrary, the action of the instrument is attributed to the principal mover. It cannot be said that the saw makes the artifact, although the artisan can be said to saw, which is the work of the saw. Understanding is the proper activity of intellect; hence even granting that understanding is an action passing on to another like moving, it does not follow that understanding belongs to Socrates if intellect is united to him only as a mover.¹⁷

What St. Thomas is maintaining immediately above is that an axe does not chop down a tree, a person chops down a tree using an axe. Strictly speaking, the eye does not see; the person sees by means of the eye. Finally, the intellect does not know, but the person knows by means of the intellect. In all instances of a tool being used, the whole person is what performs the action, not the tool itself.

Therefore, if the intellect or the soul were using the body of Socrates as an instrument, we could not properly say that Socrates knows. That would be like saying the axe chops, or the eye sees. For Socrates to know, the soul and body must be a one whole thing, not something used as an instrument so that the intellect as part of the soul can be said to know a thing.

In relation to Aquinas's argument just given, Descartes takes a more significant departure. While an ancient philosopher, even someone later, like an Averroes, might still contend for a kind of unity in the body and soul, albeit unsuccessfully, Descartes has no reservations about completely divorcing the human person from the body.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Ch. 3, n. 72.

In so doing, Redpath claims that Descartes was not truly behaving like a philosopher. In his book *A Not-So-Elementary Christian Metaphysics*, Redpath states,

For Descartes, to know, to possess truth, is identical with knowing scientifically. As Étienne Gilson (b. 1884; d. 1978) tells us, Descartes's grand project consisted in knowing everything by one method with the same amount of certainty or knowing nothing at all. Descartes had reduced truth, all knowledge (including wisdom) to science and was condemned to possess the whole of science or no truth at all.¹⁸

According to Descartes, this one method for determining truth, as Redpath describes,

consisted of an elaborate reduction of philosophy to systematic logic (a logical system of supposedly clear and distinct ideas) as a means of separating mathematics and physics from the influence of metaphysics and revealed theology, while, simultaneously, identifying mathematics and physics with the whole of science, understood as rational, logically-systematic, knowledge of sense reality.¹⁹

Descartes conflated truth, knowledge, wisdom, and philosophy with systematic logic. With systematic logic as the only means of knowledge; mathematics and mathematical physics, become the only test of truth about the physical universe, to a being he has just established as not really endowed with a body, but only having a body accidentally. At this point in the presentation, what is becoming increasingly apparent is how far this strays from wisdom and philosophy as St. Thomas and the ancient Greeks understood them; and that this helps to explain why, *strictly speaking*, Descartes should not truly be called a philosopher.

¹⁸ Redpath, *A Not-So-Elementary Christian Metaphysics*, loc. 219.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Discovering a real subject that unifies a multitude through real knowledge gained by sense experience is a far cry from removing from philosophy/science true subjects that can unify a multitude as numerically-one whole, and conflating knowledge with systematic logic alone, making only abstracted mathematical physics a means of knowledge of sensible being.

Despite being such a dramatic change Descartes's new movement caught momentum and its effects are still felt today in our highest institutions of learning and Western culture at large.

In conclusion, St. Thomas offers us a definition of true wisdom and true philosophy that just may help in our comparison of these two thinkers. He says in his *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*,

Therefore, since philosophical investigation began with wonder, it must end in or arrive at the contrary of this, and this is to advance to the worthier view, as the common proverb agrees, which states that one must always advance to the better. For what that opposite and worthier view is, is evident in the case of the above wonders, because when men have already learned the causes of these things they do not wonder. . . . Hence the goal of this science to which we should advance will be that in knowing the causes of things we do not wonder about their effects. From what has been said, then, it is evident what the nature of this science is, namely, that it is speculative and free . . . and also what its aim is, for which the whole inquiry, method, and art must be conducted. For its goal is the first and universal causes of things, about which it also makes investigations and establishes the truth. And by reason of the knowledge of these it reaches this goal, namely, that there should be no wonder because the causes of things are known.²⁰

It seems that, though the Cartesian view has been taken up, tried, tried again, and found wanting, such a neo-sophistic, counterintuitive,

²⁰ Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, I, 3, n. 68.

non-scientific/non-philosophical system was not needed in his time and is still not needed now.

On the contrary, it has had devastating effects historically, and in our time. Sound argument can be made that a method such as that of Descartes leads to utopian socialistic ideas, and these ideas hardly have proven to be wise or fruitful; on the contrary, quite the opposite. As Redpath say, "Knowledge that has become divorced from wisdom tends to degenerate into a tool of malevolence, tends to divorce itself from right relation to other forms of human knowledge and become despotic."²¹

St Thomas, on the other hand, following the ancient Greeks, rightly recognized that wisdom is initiated in sense wonder. Love of wisdom, philosophy, then, pursues and, in its most excellent form, terminates in satisfaction of wonder: achievement of the contrary opposite, or true knowledge of causes of effects.

To be able to achieve this, we must necessarily be able to use our senses, and trust the information being given is of real effects of real unities communicating intelligible substances to intelligent substances. This is necessary because it is the only way we can make sense of contrary opposite parts being united into a one organizational whole. Far from giving us wisdom, Descartes's method leaves us in a separated world where we can never really know that we are receiving true information about true substances. In fact, we cannot make sense of science or wisdom at all; for all knowledge becomes a kind of sense-reality mathematical physics; but mathematical physics is not able to explain why mathematical physics should be the only or pinnacle form of knowledge about the physical universe. And so this syntopical presentation is brought to a close with the hope that, by comparing and contrasting St. Thomas's writings with those of Descartes this paper might

²¹ Redpath, *A Not-So-Elementary Christian Metaphysics*, loc. 514.

contribute to an increase in critical aversion to all knowledge and wisdom being reduced to systematic logic. Renewing philosophy/science in our time demands recovering an understanding of true wisdom, of sense wonder initiating pursuit of true causes of true effects, and an investigation into the complicated problem of the relationship between the one and the many, which the ancient Greeks found so puzzling.



**In Pursuit of True Wisdom:
How the Re-Emergence of Classical Wonder Should Replace
Descartes's Neo-Averroistic Sophistry**

SUMMARY

Modern mathematical physics often claims to make philosophy obsolete. This presentation aims to show that the modern concept of wisdom fundamentally diverges with the thinking of Descartes, that, *strictly speaking*, at least in his metaphysical first principles, if not in his chief aim, he may be a sophist and no philosopher at all. Descartes denies the classical understanding of philosophy and thereby reduces the human person to an intellect separate from the body. Descartes initiated a popular understanding of sophistry that reverberates to today in our modern institutions of philosophy and science. But St. Thomas Aquinas anticipated this divergence and gave a defense of true wisdom in his writing against Averroes. This presentation concludes with what constitutes real philosophy and science as presented by St. Thomas Aquinas, namely sense wonder that creates a search for the true knowledge of the unity responsible for true causes of true effects. For a true restoration of philosophy and science we will need a re-emergence and recovery of this understanding of wisdom.

KEYWORDS

Averroes, Aquinas, Descartes, wisdom, science, skepticism, wonder, metaphysics, one, many.

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