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THE IMPORTANCE OF GILSON

That we in the West live in perilous times is evident to anyone who is half awake today. How to navigate through the waters of these perilous times is not so evident. My paper is about why preserving, reading, and understanding the work of Étienne Gilson is crucial for the West if we wish to be able to understand precisely the problems that are besetting the West and how we can best resolve them.

If we listen to television, newspaper, and radio commentators, the general impression we might get is that the biggest problems we face today are political and economic troubles, problems like war and peace, crime, wealth and poverty. As far back as 1937, however, Gilson saw that the West was beset by a far greater, deeper, and wider problem that, in succeeding decades, would cause cultural and civilizational turmoil in the West. In a book entitled *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, Gilson outlined how, since the dawn of the modern world in the seventeenth century, Western culture has engaged in a reckless adventure to abandon the Greek philosophical vision of the universe.¹

Gilson called this Greek philosophical vision the “Western Creed,” and he saw it as the essential foundation of all Western cultural institutions. Simultaneous with the West’s attempt to abandon the Western Creed, Gilson saw the West attempting to replace the Greek philosophical vision with something Gilson called the “Scientific Creed.” He pointed to Cartesian thought as a cultural revolution that,

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¹ Étienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, repr. 1965 of original 1937 Charles Scribner’s Sons publication).

by attempting to reduce all philosophy, sense realism, and science to the practical mechanistic science of mathematical physics, unwittingly had set the West on a course toward civilizational destruction.

In ancient times, and up until the start of the twentieth century, Western intellectuals considered philosophy and science identical. Philosophical sciences like metaphysics, ethics, and politics could make claims to have a foundation for their principles in the sense world, in a sense realism and sense wonder. And all these sciences could claim, in some way, to be rational, realistic, true.

After Descartes and the Protestant Reformation had come on the scene, however, something was radically altered, Gilson thought, in the relationship between modern mathematical physics and the classical sciences of metaphysics, ethics, and politics. Just like the Protestant Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin, modern philosophy's father René Descartes showed distrust for natural reason. Despite the fact that Descartes is celebrated for his declaration that truth lies in "clear and distinct ideas," Descartes had actually located all human truth and error in strength and weakness of the human will, in what Friedrich Nietzsche would later famously identify as the "Will to Power."

As Descartes saw the human condition, we human beings are spirits encased in machines. We are essentially two substances that cannot communicate with each other. God is the only cause of communication between these two substances, our mind and body. Hence, for Descartes the proper object of human science is clear and distinct ideas, not real, or mind-independent, beings that we grasp with the help of our bodily senses.

Moreover, Descartes thought "science" is a name that we give to different logical deductive systems of clear and distinct ideas. In this way, Descartes reduced all philosophy, science, to differing kinds of systematic logic.

Outside restraints need to be placed upon the human imagination by reasoning systematically under the influence of clear and distinct ideas like God, the soul, and extension. For Descartes thought our unrestrained imaginations tend to cause our wills to wander, to become

weak and unable to focus on ideas, see them clearly, grasp truth, and provide us with true science.

In the area of physical science, Descartes maintained that just this sort of wandering occurs when we try to determine the essence of the sense world independently of the use of mathematical ideas. Hence, for Descartes, because it uses clear and distinct ideas to view the sense universe, mathematical physics is the only science that can tell us anything true about the essence of the sense world. And because they use clear and distinct ideas to study human freedom, while being able to tell us something true about the human spirit, human sciences like metaphysics, politics, and ethics can tell us nothing true about the existence and use of freedom in the sensible world.²

Within a century and a half of Descartes' dream of re-establishing science on the foundation of a system of clear and distinct ideas, and after the wondrous success of Newtonian physics, the Lutheran thinker Immanuel Kant sought to go beyond Descartes by simultaneously (a) protecting the fundamentalist Lutheran understanding of faith by effectively divorcing the philosophical disciplines of metaphysics, politics, and ethics completely from science founded in sense reality, and (b) reducing all scientific reasoning about sense reality to mechanistic mathematical physics.³ By so doing, Kant solidified a divorce that Descartes had introduced between freedom and truth, faith and science, and in turn the philosophical disciplines of metaphysics, ethics, and politics and contemporary mathematical physics, science, and sense reality.

At present, this several-hundred year project to divorce philosophy from science and reduce science to mechanized mathematical physics

² For a detailed exposition and critique of Descartes' teachings about philosophy and science, see Peter A. Redpath, *Cartesian Nightmare: An Introduction to Transcendental Sophistry* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Editions Rodopi, B. V., 1997).

³ For a detailed exposition and critique of the role Kant played in the Cartesian revolution, see Peter A. Redpath, *Masquerade of the Dream Walkers: Prophetic Theology from the Cartesians to Hegel* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, Editions Rodopi, B. V., 1998), pp. 101-166.

has created an essential conflict within Western cultural institutions, within our intellectual, political, and religious organizations.

In Cartesian thought, truth and freedom are properties of will, not reason. Hence, freedom and truth are essentially non-rational. And rationality is essentially not free or true. This means that while modern physical science might wish to make claims to truth, if it claims to be rational, it can only make true statements when by “true statements” we mean statements expressing non-rational feelings or “beliefs.” Truth in Cartesian science can be no more than an intense feeling about an idea or system of ideas. Hence the propensity of so many people today to refer to physical science as a “belief system.”

This essential opposition between reason and will, freedom, and truth means that within a Cartesian conception of science we can never be free by acting rationally because free behavior is essentially non-rational. Hence the propensity of so many Western youth today to identify being free with doing “crazy” things.

Moreover, this essential opposition between reason and will, freedom, and truth means that within a Cartesian conception of science we have totally abdicated any means for rationally judging or evaluating truth in any of our intellectual, cultural, or political institutions or disciplines. Hence the rampant madness, falsehood, and dishonesty that increasingly infect Western cultural institutions (like universities, politics, media, business, sports) in their essential operations.

After all, if we buy into the Cartesian worldview, if we want to be scientifically political, politically truthful, we cannot expect to behave reasonably. And if we want to be politically rational, we cannot expect to say anything true. If we want to be scientifically intellectual, we have to express our feelings. And these feelings have to be intensely non-rational if we expect them to express any truth, and not truthful if we expect them to be in any way rational. If we want to be successful, behave reasonably, in business, sports, or media, we have to lie and be dishonest because the rational is the opposite of what is true. The net result of such behavior in our time is international terrorism and global economic meltdown.

Given the essential madness of Cartesian thought, Western thinkers over the past several centuries, have attempted to use several intellectual frauds, different forms of sophistry, to help maintain the intellectually unjustifiable modern reduction of all science to physics and uphold the divorce of truth and freedom from rationality. Chief among these frauds has been modern socialism, which has called upon socialistic thinkers like Georg Hegel, Karl Marx, Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, and Josef Stalin to fabricate the myth that the essential flaw within modern Western Cartesian thought has actually been a necessary historical moment in the march of the human spirit to emerge from some form of backward historical consciousness into that of an Enlightened socialism, bringing into being a new scientific world order.

Shortly after the end of World War II, Gilson wrote a powerful work entitled *The Terrors of the Year 2000* in which he predicted that, instead of learning its cultural lesson about the need to reconcile the divorce between classical philosophy and modern physical science, the post-World War II era would yield no lasting peace and would become a time “where science, formerly our hope and our joy, would be the source of greatest terror.”⁴

At the close of World War II, Gilson claimed that, with the help of Nietzsche, we human beings brought the modern conflict between rationality and truth and freedom to a new level. With the bombing of Hiroshima, we in the West had made our most astounding scientific discovery: “the great secret that science has just wrested from matter is the secret of its destruction. To know today is synonymous with to destroy.”⁵

With Nietzsche’s short sentence, “They do not know that God is dead,” Gilson thought that the transvaluation of Western values had started in earnest. Postmodern man wished to make himself divine,

⁴ Étienne Gilson, *The Terrors of the Year 2000* (Toronto: St. Michael’s College, 1949), pp. 5, 7.

⁵ *Id.*, pp. 7-9.

usurp God's place, become God. A fight to the death had ensued between the Ancient and Modern West.

Gilson considered Nietzsche's declaration of God's death "the capital discovery of modern times." Compared to Nietzsche's discovery, Gilson maintained, no matter how far back we trace human history, we "will find no upheaval to compare with this in the extent or in the depth of its cause."⁶ Gilson thought that Nietzsche's declaration of God's death signaled a metaphysical revolution of the highest, widest, and deepest order.

From time immemorial, we in the West, Gilson thought, have based our cultural creed and scientific inspiration, our intellectual and cultural institutions, upon our Western Creed, which included the conviction that gods, or a God, existed. No longer. All of a sudden, God no longer exists. Worse, He never existed! For Gilson the implication is clear: "We shall have to change completely our every thought, word and deed. The entire human order totters on its base."⁷

If our entire cultural history depended upon the unswerving conviction that God exists, "the totality of the future must needs depend on the contrary certitude, that God does not exist," and, in turn, on a subliminal hatred of the Western Creed. Gilson thought that Nietzsche's message was a metaphysical bomb more powerful than the atomic weapon dropped on Hiroshima: "Everything that was true from the beginning of the human race will suddenly become false." Moreover, mankind alone must create for itself a new self-definition, which will become human destiny, the human project: *To destroy*.⁸

Gilson maintained that Nietzsche's discovery of God's death signaled the dawn of a new age, a new political world disorder, in which the aim of postmodern culture, its metaphysical project, had become to make war upon, to overthrow, traditional truths and values. To build

⁶ Id., pp. 14-16. Gilson cites Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*, especially "Why I am a Fatality."

⁷ Id., pp. 14-16.

⁸ Id., pp. 16-17.

our brave new world order, we have to go beyond Descartes and overthrow the metaphysical foundations of Western culture.

At present, we in Western culture find ourselves in a condition of cultural and civilizational confusion precisely because, as Gilson understood, we have lost our sense realism and have turned our understanding of science into an enemy of truth and a friend of cultural destruction. Having lost our sense realism, we have lost our philosophical minds, for our philosophical minds have lost touch with reality and have developed a subliminal hatred for our cultural traditions and institutions.

Having lost our understanding of the nature of philosophy, we can no longer find any rational arguments by which to justify and sustain our different cultural institutions, which increasingly we are encouraged to loathe. Having become so completely lost intellectually, we have increasingly transformed ourselves into universal skeptics, prime subjects for enslavement by dictators.

Western culture has traditionally justified its cultural institutions by use of classical philosophical arguments rooted in the common philosophical convictions that man is a rational animal and God exists. Having lost our faith in these essential precepts of the Western Creed, we in the West have largely lost our ability to think philosophically. Thus, we can no longer rationally and philosophically justify Western culture itself.

Why is Gilson important for us today? Because, among all the leading intellectuals of the past or present generation, no one has better diagnosed the philosophical ills of Western culture and better understood the remedy for those ills than has Gilson.

The hour is late. We in the West no longer have the luxury of ignoring a return to philosophical realism and to a philosophical defense of our Western Creed, including our belief in the existence of God. The choice before us is clear: philosophy or the slaughterhouse, Gilson or Nietzsche.

THE IMPORTANCE OF GILSON**SUMMARY**

The author aims at answering why preserving, reading, and understanding the work of Étienne Gilson is crucial for the Western civilization if one wishes to be able to understand precisely the problems that are besetting the West and how one can best resolve them. He claims that among all the leading intellectuals of the past or present generation, no one has better diagnosed the philosophical ills of Western culture and better understood the remedy for those ills than has Étienne Gilson.

KEYWORDS: Étienne Gilson, Western civilization, Western Creed, Scientific Creed.