

Epilogue:
A Counterfeit Choice

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Many thinkers today are disgruntled and alarmed by postmodern skepticism and relativism. Yet many of these same thinkers are perfectly content to advocate the doctrines and developments of modern philosophers who antedate the postmodernists. Surely, they assume that there is a difference in kind between the more recent group and their predecessors. This is a mistake, of course. Postmodern philosophy is perfectly continuous with modern philosophy, and in fact represents its inevitable outcome. There is a tonic for what ails us, but it is not to be found in the works of modern philosophers. Instead, it is to be discovered in classical realism.

In his book, *Methodic Realism*, Étienne Gilson says that the philosopher must face at the outset a primitive choice. That choice is whether to pursue the path of modern philosophy, which supposes that the external world requires a demonstration, or the path of classical realism, which (as Aristotle observes in the *Physics*) holds that one need not demonstrate the obvious. If these are our original choices, why is it that modern philosophical history has chosen predominantly against realism? One reason is that modern philosophers have succeeded in caricaturing realism as naive. But realism is not naive. It is critical and rational in its conviction that the knower is immediately aware of the external world, for it recognizes the arbitrariness and incoherency implicit in the skeptic's alternative. The modernist labels realism as "naive" because he or she has redefined "critical" to mean presuppositionless. But the realist understands that philosophy can get along well without a presuppositionless beginning. Philosophy is not mathematics; it does not depend on the standard *more geometrico demonstrata*. Ordinary experience will do quite well as a beginning for wisdom. Gilson concedes that a thinker has a right to begin philosophy

anyway he wants, but to assume with the modernists that philosophy *must* be based on radical doubt about the external world is unreasonable.

Maritain is even less accommodating than Gilson in his assessment of modern philosophy. He insists that modern philosophy suffers from the great “French sin,” the error of subjectivism, an imprudent and counterproductive choice. In fact, the problem of skepticism destroys the possibility of philosophy, turning philosophy into ideosophy, merely an inventory of our own states of consciousness. Why? Because, again, to start with the problem of skepticism is to presume that reality, the extramental world, requires a demonstration. This leads to the Lockean error (as apparently the French sin was exported across the Channel) that the objects of knowledge are our own ideas. That is to say, we know directly ideas, states of consciousness, not things. Once one commits to this starting point, one is condemned never to know the external world. Philosophy, since it aims to make claims about the external world, is reduced to mere guesswork. Representationalism is its best case scenario. Hence, Maritain denies that modern thought is really philosophical at all. It is constrained, by its own principles and assumptions, to know only ideas, not things. As a result, it is more properly called “ideosophy” than philosophy. Eric Vogelin has called it a kind of Gnosticism, on grounds that it is unnatural to think this way about the external world, and that one must be trained by an elite culture, one must be “enculturated” or “indoctrinated” to accept something so counter-intuitive. After cultural training, nowadays entrusted to departments of philosophy, that which is not philosophy, indeed that which is anti-philosophical, because it denies the possibility of knowing the real, becomes by an Orwellian twist the conventional use of the word “philosophy.”

Perhaps the point can be made by an illustration. It is as though it has become acceptable to believe that the sun will not come up tomorrow because we can, by a hyperbolic effort of our imagination, consider the possibility. Of course, it is far and away more reasonable to believe that it will come up. But if absolute certainty is the standard for knowledge, even hyperbolic doubt becomes decisive against what is plausible. If one were to obligate everyone to make this doubt authoritative over all their beliefs and behavior, then one would have a parallel with what modern philosophy has done to us. Modern philosophy is analagous to demanding that we should change our whole behavior on the assumption that the sun will not come up tomorrow because we cannot be absolutely certain that it will. But needless to say this is quite irrational (which makes one suppose Gilson is being merely ironic or exceedingly charitable when he allows radical skepticism as a primitive “choice”). There is no reason to change our attitude about life because there is a remote chance a comet will wipe out the solar system. One should base her life and thought on what is reasonable, on what is

plausible. It is neither critical nor reasonable, then, to entertain this skeptical procedure and its consequences in philosophy or any other walk of life.

Nor does one need to rely on illustration to expose the shaky foundations of modern thought. One can make the point more prosaically. Between competing claims, between realism and anti-realism (that which Maritain calls “ideosophy”), the former prevails because (1) the skeptic presupposes it when distinguishing truth from error and (2) the skeptic is a realist in his or her practical life anyway. These criticisms are ancient. Augustine catalogues them, along with many others, in *Contra Academicos*. The second objection is sufficient motive for ordinary people to not give skepticism a second thought, but for trained Gnostics this motive or disposition to affirm the real is, like common sense, dismissed as mere superstition. It must be condemned because the authority of ordinary experience puts the lie to the skeptic’s project. Likewise, the first objection warrants a remark or two. It reminds us of a fundamental incoherency that plagues modern philosophy’s compulsion to begin with the skeptic’s problem. The problem of skepticism, which is, in short, doubt as to whether the mind is adequate to know the external world, can only arise through a concern for error. But from whence do we learn error? We learn it from ordinary experience, which teaches us that sometimes we make mistakes in judging objects. Descartes admits this. He explains that we err when we affirm the stick in water is really bent. But what is this admission but to concede that the standard for skepticism—the distinction between truth and error—is itself supplied by ordinary experience. But this means that the skeptic simply grants what he claims to doubt: the veridicality of ordinary experience. The skeptic must affirm the existence of the external world because it is presumably experience of such that furnishes the evidence for truth versus error. The problem of skepticism, then, presupposes what it doubts. In fairness to Descartes, he was aware of this inconsistency, but it did not stop his followers from nonetheless obligating the rest of philosophy to pay homage to the problem of skepticism as philosophy’s sole legitimate origin.

Richard Weaver explains in his book, *Ideas Have Consequences*, that a central feature of modern philosophy, which follows from its anti-realist origins, is nominalism. The human mind is abandoned to signs and their construction. But what is signified? It cannot be the external world, which is, after all, in doubt. Modern philosophers, following Berkeley and Hume, dispensed with abstraction through which the intellect apprehends extramental intelligibilities of which words can be signs. For modern thought there remains only the signs, only words, naming conscious states, none of which necessarily has any known correspondence with any reality outside the mind. The mind and its construction become the standards for the true and the good. Neo-Protagoreanism has

triumphed. "Man is the measure of all things." Lacking a correspondence with the real, philosophy has devolved into the epistemological and moral relativism of postmodern language games. Of course, it is doubtful whether there is anyone to talk to really in the course of these language games, since the same reasons that compel us to phenomenalism about the external world compel us to phenomenalism about other persons, those substances which communicate signs to each other. Once belief in external substances is compromised, so are language games. But no matter. Modernism transcends these old fashioned, Socratic demands for consistency and accountability. We can now believe whatever we want. There are no foundations to argue these matters anyway. But if one finds such an exercise in word-games tiresome, then Brendan Sweetman has edited here a volume that both will criticize the emptiness of modernism (and postmodernism) and will prescribe the recovery of a philosophical, realist tradition that restores the soul. Moreover, that prescription will disabuse us of any illusion that in modern philosophy there is a remedy for what ails us.