

John Young's "THE SCOPE OF PHILOSOPHY"

reviewed by Don G. Boland LLB (Syd) PhD (Angelicum) 28 July 2008

Can we imagine knowing anything much about the world without the microscope and the telescope? Our knowledge of the world around us has become so much dependent upon such instruments of science, becoming more and more sophisticated and "technical" in their use, that without them we appear to be as children or *naifs* if we try to explain things without relying upon those who are expert in their use. Yet it is easily forgotten that these are relatively recent inventions in the long course of the history of human knowledge and science.

It is important to appreciate that such artificial aids to our understanding need to be used with discretion. Marvellous as they are we can become overawed by their power. We ought from time to time to put them aside and look at the world with our own natural eyesight. That is to say we should not forgo our common sense and the philosophy of life that we are able to build upon this natural basis of all knowledge.

Almost without our realising it, the possession of these powerful instruments of modern science has changed the "focus" of the eyes of our understanding. We need to be careful that these magnifying glasses do not in fact narrow our focus instead of enlarge it; that they do not direct our attention away from the real world rather than towards it, according to the warning contained in the celebrated French saying: *ce que l'on voit se cache ce que l'on ne voit pas*; "that which one sees hides that which one does not see". Such an artificial concentration of attention can mean that we miss seeing much that is nearby, and otherwise obvious, to ordinary eyesight.

The astronomers, for instance, tell us there is no evidence of God in the outer reaches of the Universe; the bio-chemists tell us that there is no evidence of an invisible principle of life in the innermost parts of the human body and endeavour to explain its vitality without recourse to any soul. Yet these intangibles are conclusions of the natural and superior wisdom of the sages of mankind, such as Plato and Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas, and are almost universally recognised, if indistinctly, by people of ordinary common sense. One has only to refer to the common language of all peoples to see this is so.

John Young has done us a great service by reminding us of the real world around us, which we have almost forgotten about because we have come to neglect "old" Philosophy in our admiration for the latest science. For there is much, indeed in a real sense everything, within the Scope of Philosophy. The title is significant. We do not need a telescope to see a distant God; the Supreme Being, as a conclusion of reason, is within the scope of philosophy. We do not need a microscope to observe the soul; it is within the scope of natural philosophy as known to Aristotle, no mean example of human intelligence (*il maestro di color che sanno*; "the master of those who know". *Inferno 4, 131*).

It is of course an ambitious project, to deal with the scope of philosophy within 340 pages. Indeed, it can only be an introduction, but it is a necessary re-introduction for many of us. The author's plan is a good one. A brief survey of the history of philosophy is a good way to start, dealt with by a degree of familiarity with the subjects and a clarity of exposition that will satisfy I believe both expert and general reader. Then follows a comparison of philosophy with other kinds of knowledge; beginning with common sense knowledge, the important connection with which is sadly overlooked in many other books on philosophy. He includes here, of course, the much vexed matter of the relation of philosophy to science as understood today. Necessarily, this can only be touched upon in a short overview. Many aspects would need further clarification. Finally, he mentions the relation of philosophy to Sacred Theology. As an evident admirer of St. Thomas he brings out well the intimate connection but clear distinction between these two.

As a concession to the somewhat excessive concentration in modern philosophy upon knowledge as such, rather than starting with the study of reality as obviously known, the author deals next with the nature of knowledge, devoting three chapters to it, treating first of knowledge in general, then of sense knowledge and intellectual knowledge. This I believe is a good strategy. For, unfortunately, the main difficulty today with studying Philosophy is the underlying scepticism that seeks to undermine our confidence in human reason.

Following upon this is a chapter with a critique of various schools of modern and contemporary philosophy. This fits appropriately after the discussion of knowledge. Then there is a chapter on human nature which also appropriately follows the treatment of human knowledge. Within the confines of such a short treatment many issues have to be dealt with rather perfunctorily. Some “technical” terms of thomistic philosophy may cause some difficulty. But, overall, the author succeeds to maintain a clear and coherent presentation. One of the virtues of this author is his ability to present concepts and principles in an easy to understand manner.

A chapter outlining the classification of the various parts of philosophy follows. This makes use of St. Thomas's classification of theoretical sciences in his commentary on Boethius's *De Trinitate*, of which there is a translation in English under the title *The Division and Methods of the Sciences*. To this he adds the division of the practical sciences. It is the traditional aristotelian division. The terminology may prove a bit off-putting to some, but the author generally explains it clearly and simply. As to the content of the division one might quibble here and there about details but it gives a good overview. I would have liked a bit more to have been said about the rational art of Dialectic as defined by Aristotle and its relation to Logic. Omitting it leaves Logic a bit stark on the philosophical landscape. Aristotle in fact includes Logic in a whole complex of rational arts.

The remaining chapters deal with “some questions in philosophy”. It is a good sample of the more principal parts of philosophy, including Metaphysics, Ethics and “Poetics”. This last one concerns the philosophy of the fine and useful arts (though he

treats almost exclusively of the fine arts). It ought not to be confused with “Poietics” as used by Aristotle, which is concerned with the literary arts such as drama and poetry. Finally, there is a chapter on the importance of philosophy, perhaps something that ought to have been placed at the beginning.

But there can be no doubting that John Young has produced a book that is of the utmost importance to our time. There is no more crying need today than a return to reason in the ordinary sense of looking at the world with our own eyes and reasoning things out. The value of the telescope and the microscope is not to be denied. But they have not necessarily extended the scope of our understanding; rather have they helped to fill in the details of what lies beyond the ordinary range of our senses. Philosophy is a universal kind of knowledge, founded on our common knowledge of things, on experience available to all. Science, especially modern science, tends more and more to be a series of specialisms, in many respects the preserve of a few in whom the rest of us must put our trust. An increase in specialised knowledge does not, or should not, change our common sense grasp of things and our basic philosophy of life.

Unfortunately, the modern philosophical fashion of ignoring the obvious and promoting a radical scepticism has encouraged many to endeavour to reconstruct reality upon speculative theories, purportedly based on the findings of highly specialised sciences, that fly in the face of common sense. John Young's book, hopefully, will show up the spuriousness of this “scientific” vision of the world. It will certainly prove to be a tonic for those wanting to see a restoration of a sane philosophy to its rightful place in the culture and educational institutions of our society.

The book is published by WARRANE College P.O. Box 123, Kensington 1465 NSW Australia