Implicit Philosophy

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Fides et ratio is an encyclical of great scope and depth and provides an occasion for discussing any number of important issues. What I shall do is at once more modest and, I think, not wholly devoid of philosophical interest.

I intend to reflect on a remark to be found in paragraph 4 of *Fides et ratio*, namely, that there is an "implicit philosophy" held by all, that provides a reference-point for the rival philosophical systems. My remarks will allude to Common Sense Philosophy, with particular reference to Père Buffier, and to Anti-foundationalism, for reasons which, if not already obvious, will emerge.

1. The Fundamental Questions

In the Introduction to the encyclical, the Pope adopts as a motto for his initial remarks the words carved over the door of the temple at Delphi: "Know thyself". The opening paragraph, having noted that faith and reason are two means by which reason rises to the contemplation of the truth, exhibiting in this an innate desire of the human heart, appears to make knowledge of God instrumental to knowledge of ourselves. "...so that by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves". Or is self-knowledge taken to be a bonus of knowledge of God?

An understanding of what has come to be called the Pope's Personalism surely depends on grasping the import of this liminal

assertion. Man's deeper grasp of the truth over the ages "has unfolded —as it must— within the horizon of personal self-consciousness: the more human beings know reality and the world, the more they know themselves in their uniqueness..." (1). As a result, the question of the meaning of things and their existence becomes ever more pressing.

This almost Cartesian order of procedure —self-God-world— gives way to a milder claim. Only humans among earthly creatures have self-awareness. And only they are prompted to ask the big and fundamental questions:

Where have I come from and where am I going?
Why is there evil?
What is there after this life?

This is supported by appeal to the sacred writings of Israel and of other peoples, to epics and tragedies, to the philosophical writings of Plato and Aristotle. Such questions reveal the search for meaning which drives us. How we answer such questions decides the direction of our lives.

We cannot think of Delphi without thinking of Socrates and of his sense that he knew nothing. When we first read that as young people, it seems a *façon de parler*, but with age it seems an inescapable admission. Among the things Socrates did not know was himself. (*Phaedrus* 230A) Was he a beast or half-divine? Self-awareness becomes the awareness that we do not know what we are. How do we go about the quest for such knowledge? In part, perhaps, by setting the self aside as a thematic object.

2. Implicit Philosophy

Philosophy is introduced as a resource whereby men can have greater knowledge of the truth "so that their lives may be ever more human" (3). Philosophy addresses the fundamental questions and is thus one of the noblest of human tasks: it is a love of wisdom. The wisdom sought is not of course deeper knowledge of what human

beings are, though knowledge of the divine will provide a measure of our finitude and ontological imperfection. But philosophy has had a long and checkered history since its Greek beginnings. It might seem to have become an equivocal term. A needed clarification of the term is offered in paragraph 4. These are the steps:

1. "Driven by the desire to discover the ultimate truth of existence, human beings seem to acquire those universal elements of knowledge which enable them to understand themselves better and to advance their own self-realization" (Again, an apparently humanist telos).

2. "These fundamental elements... spring from the *wonder* awakened in them by the contemplation of creation: human beings are astonished to discover themselves as part of the world, in a relationship with others like them, all sharing a common destiny" (A recognition of the primacy of knowledge of the world segues into a suggestion that individuals-autonomous? —are about to enter into a social contract).

3. This pursuit gives rise to different philosophical systems in different times and different cultural contexts. There arises the temptation "to identify one single stream with the whole of philosophy". [4] To overcome such "philosophical pride" we are advised to respect each system in its wholeness, "without any instrumentalization".

4. Philosophical *enquiry* enjoys primacy over each and ever system and each of them ought loyally to serve it.

The encyclical thus seems to embrace a radical pluralism of philosophical systems or traditions. They are linked by the quest or enquiry that produces each of them, but since each must be "respected in its wholeness, without any instrumentalization", the plurality of systems appears radical, with no substantive comparisons possible.

It is precisely to prevent such an interpretation, that the encyclical introduces what is the topic of my remarks. Despite the need to recognize that different times and cultures have produced different philosophies, "it is possible to discern a core of philosophical insight within the history of thought as a whole" (4). Of what does that core consist?

Consider, for example, the principles of non-contradiction, finality and causality, as well as the concept of the person as a free and intelligent subject, with the capacity to know God, truth and goodness. Consider as well certain fundamental moral norms which are shared by all. [4] Transcending the philosophical systems which have their different emphases and accents, there is "a body of knowledge which may be judged a kind of spiritual heritage of humanity". It is this that the encyclical calls "an implicit philosophy". This is what everyone knows, "albeit in a general and unreflective way". Such knowledge can serve as a "reference point" for the different philosophical schools. This implicit philosophy is then spoke of in terms of intuiting and formulating "the first universal principles of being".

a) preliminary characterization

If such truths are implicit in any philosophical system, and if we are willing to speak of Thomism as a system, then such an implicit philosophy should be discernible in it. It would be an easy matter to attach references to writings of Thomas for each of the truths which make up that body of knowledge. The claim is that this could be done for other philosophical systems as well. That is puzzling, needless to say, since there are philosophical systems which were fashioned precisely to exclude such claims. It would seem somewhat Pickwickian to say that the fundamental truths are negatively present in systems which reject them.

This difficulty could be circumvented by saying that these truths are implicit in any philosophy in the sense that they are antecedent to any philosophical system, but which some philosophical systems seemingly forget or perversely deny. Then this paragraph of the

introduction would be taken to embrace some form of Common Sense Philosophy. I shall return to that as General MacArthur did to the Philippines.

How would Thomas Aquinas characterize the elements of the body of knowledge listed?

i) the principle of contradiction
ii) the principle of finality
iii) the principle of causality
iv) Human person as free and intelligent
v) with the capacity to know God, truth and goodness
vi) fundamental moral norms

The recurrence of "principle" suggests that these are starting points, where knowledge begins, that is, things known as such, in themselves, per se. (i) is of course the example par excellence of perseity. Could the same be said of (ii) and (iii)? A mark of a first principle is that it cannot be reasoned *to*, there is nothing prior from which it could be shown to follow. Argument on behalf of principles thus takes a peculiar form: the *reductio*. If one denies P, it must be shown that ¬P leads the naysayer into incoherence and self-contradiction. But finality is defended in that way and so too is causality. The burden of disproof is on the one who denies that things act for an end or that this thing is brought about by the agency of that.

A clear instance of this can be found in the case of the defense of the notion of ultimate end in *Nicomachean Ethics* I, 2. That there is an ultimate end is proved by showing that its denial leads to incoherence. And of course *Nicomachean Ethics* I, 1 begins with the assertion that all human activities are undertaken for the same of an end, with a listing of the various kinds of human acts.

As for (iv), Thomas often remarks (e.g. *Q. D. De malo*, q. 6, art. Un.) that one who denies freedom denies the very foundation of human society, that is, the very context within which he makes and is capable of making his denial. (v) might seem to offer an exception

to this interpretation of the list: Thomas would of course deny that knowledge of God's existence is *per se notum*. Nonetheless, he argues that the Supreme Good is implicitly desired in any human act, and the Supreme Truth implicitly recognized in any judgment.

The fundamental moral norms suggest the first principles of practical reasoning, that is, natural law precepts, which Thomas explicitly argues are known of themselves, *per se nota.*

b) the principles as common

To reflect in this way on the elements of the implicit philosophy to which the encyclical draws attention could have the effect of making these fundamental truths appear as deliverances of Thomism, and seem therefore to be an example of that "philosophical pride", close cousin of *odium theologicum*, against which the encyclical warns us. Nothing is more familiar than to hear Natural Law referred to as a Thomistic tenet, with the suggestion that the adoption or defense of natural law is a move into or within one philosophical system among many. This has the unfortunate effect of making the elements of the implicit philosophy tenets which divide rather than unite. But of course the claim is that knowledge of these truths is, however implicit and inchoate, prior to any formal philosophizing, so much so that it gives us a reference point by which we can measure the results of formal philosophizing, that is, particular philosophical systems. And this suggests the parallel to Common Sense philosophy that I would now like to say some few things about.

3. Pere Buffier and Common Sense

Pere Buffier (1661-1737) was a Jesuit who lived a century after Descartes (1596-1650) more or less, their lives did not quite overlap. Descartes haunted and defined Buffier's thought and it is perhaps significant, that so relatively soon after Descartes, Jesuits like Buffier seem utterly unaware of even the remnants of the Scholasticism that Descartes was taught at LaFlèche, a college with which Buffier was later associated. The Jesuit is primarily interested in defending common principles from the skepticism or even

solipsism that may seem to follow on Cartesian methodic doubt. The relation of Buffier to Descartes is complicated and I do not presume to comment on it here. But this can be said: if Descartes thought it reasonable to doubt that of which he was not certain, Buffier is committed to showing that what Descartes thought could be doubted cannot be.

In his *Traite des prémières verités*, Buffier first discusses what is meant by a primary truth and what it is that primary truths have in common; second, he discussed primary truths based on a general consideration of beings; third, he turns to first truths concerning spiritual matters. What does Buffier mean by the common sense?

> *J'entend donc ici par le* sens commun, *la disposition que la nature a mise dans tous les hommes ou manifestment dans la plupart d'entre eux, pour leur faire porter, quand ils ont atteint l'usage de la raison, un jugement commun et uniforme sur des objets differents du sentiment intime de leur propre perception; jugement qui n'est point consequence d'aucun principe anterieur*[1].

Buffier gives these examples of such truths:

*That there are other beings and other men than myself in the world.

*That there is among them something that is called truth, wisdom, prudence, and it is not arbitrary.

*There is in me something called intelligence and something that is not, namely, body, such that the properties of the one differ from those of the other.

*There is no conspiracy among men to deceive and mislead me.

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[1] Pere BUFFIER: *Oeuvres philosophiques*, avec notes et introduction par Francisque Bouillier, Paris: Charpentier Librairie-Editeur 1843, p. 15. This volume contains the *Traite des Premieres verites, Elements de metaphysique and Examen des prejuges vulgaires*.

And so on. These are harder to characterize than the elements of the implicit philosophy given in the encyclical. But perhaps this is sufficient to base the claim that the implicit philosophy of the encyclical is not to be identified with such a philosophy of common sense as Buffier's[2].

It is interesting that Buffier, along with his list of truths no one could fail to know, provides an analysis of Vulgar Prejudices[3]. Presumably these are falsehoods that carry the allure of the self-evident due to familiarity. There are some surprising items on Buffier's list:

*That two people can contradict one another on the same subject and both be right.

*That science does not consist of knowing a lot.

*That women are capable of learning all the sciences.

*That savages are as happy as the civilized.

*That all languages are equally beautiful.

*That is wrong to complain of the multitude of bad books.

All in all, a strange list. But at least it serves the purpose of showing that for Buffier, the existence of truths that no one can fail to know, does not exclude a good number of falsehoods that have become commonplaces. (Of course what Buffier called vulgar prejudices may appear to us to be prejudices of Buffier). Many would take common sense to include both of these. If so, Buffier would then doubtless maintain that common sense contains the capacity to correct itself —not in its entirety, but with respect to mere prejudices.

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[2] Reginald GARRIGOU-LAGRANGE: *Le sens commun*, Paris: Nouvelle Librairie Nationale 1926, criticizes the Scottish School and argues that its conception of common sense differs from the Thomistic sense he develops.

[3] P. BUFFIER: *Oeuvres philosophiques*..., pp. 313-417.

Buffier's procedure would seem to the the obvious one of (1) recognizing some non-gainsayable propositions; (2) asking what characterizes them; (3) asking if they or other candidates for primary truths actually deserve the appelation.

4. Thomism and Implicit Philosophy

The encyclical, from its opening paragraph, links the two ways in which reason arrives at the truth, faith and reason. The believed truths which characterize Christian faith are the presuppositions of theology: the theologian accepts those truths like any believer, but unlike most believers he reflects on them in a special way. Bringing reason to bear on the truths of faith includes a number of distinct tasks: to defend revealed truth against the charge of falsehood or nonsense; to seek an understanding of the mysteries of faith; and to draw out the implications of revealed truths.

Believed truths may be rejected on the basis that they are in conflict with what we know. Nothing is more familiar than the claim that science has shown something that has rendered belief impossible. What the critic is relying on, as deep background, is the principle of contradiction. Let P stand for some mystery of the faith. The attack consists in the claim that we now know that $\neg P$ is true. That being the case, P is false. The believer who responds to this, does so of course within the ambience of the same presupposition. He will seek to show that no such contradiction exists. *If* it did, the result would be as the critic claims.

Since the principle of contradiction is one of the elements of the implicit philosophy of paragraph 4, it looks as if the implicit philosophy is presupposed to both philosophical and theological reasoning. But, as the name suggests, implicit philosophy is more closely akin to explicit philosophy. How characterize the relation between implicit and explicit philosophy.

There are certain things that all men know prior to and independent of explicit philosophizing.

This is of course a retroactive, explicit remark. What is said about implicit philosophy is perforce explicit. The claim is not that throughout the world people will be found asserting that there are things that they and others know prior to explicit philosophizing. To utter this, is to philosophize explicitly, along the lines of Aristotle's remark that to ask whether or not one ought to philosophize is already to answer the question affirmatively.

One of the merits of the philosophizing of Thomas Aquinas to which reference is made in *Fides et ratio* is that it represents a sustained effort to root itself in what everyone already knows, that is, in some version of what the encyclical calls "implicit philosophy". The *principia communia* that are prior to all *scientiae* are presupposed by the latter and that into which arguments are analyzed in order to show their cogency. Unless there were such common truths, known to be such *per se*, derived knowledge would be impossible. Thomas learned this from Aristotle, needless to say.

This whole conception of knowledge and of philosophy has been contested by labeling it Foundationalism, and then arguing that Foundationalism makes no sense, Friends of mine —as Aristotle said of the Platonists— are paladins of anti-foundationalism. It would be preposterous to seem to settle such a quarrel in these introductory remarks. It suffices that friend and foe alike recognize this assumption in Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas[4]. What this also goes to show, of course, is that the assumption of the encyclical concerning Implicit Philosophy is itself a controversial issue. Needless to say, the fact that a truth causes controversy does not tell against it. But the constituents of the Implicit Philosophy indicate the kind of argument that would be appropriate to denials of it.

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[4] Attention should be drawn to the posthumous volume of Olaf TOLLEFSEN: *Foundationalism Defended: Essays on Epistemology, Ethics, and Aesthetics*, Maryland: Cambridge Press: Bethesda 1995, especially the titular essay.

5. Away from Subjectivism

I began by calling attention to the surprising emphasis on self-knowledge in the opening remarks of *Fides et ratio.* Some passages seem to imply that the whole point of knowledge is to get clear about ourselves, as if man were the most noble and intelligible thing in reality. John Paul II's personalism presumably entails no such enormity. But there is undeniably the suggestion that the self is some sort of lens through which others things are best seen. Or perhaps it is the other way around: the greater our knowledge of other things, the greater will be our knowledge of ourselves, the latter being put forward as the ultimate point of enquiry. However this might be, it is important to distinguish that from the turn to the subject of which Cornelio Fabro wrote: *Sic incoepit tragedia moderna.* Fabro located this turn, unsurprisingly, in the Father of Modern Philosophy.

Descartes famously sought the beginnings of certain knowledge, its primary instances, as the result of the application of a method. The application of this method to the contents of his mind, the inventory of cognitive claims he and others would make, revealed them all to be dubitable. This means that every claim to know for certain has been shown to be mistaken. More precisely, all knowledge claims dependent on sense perception and all mathematical propositions are susceptible of doubt, it is imaginable or conceivable that they are false, and therefore they must be set aside. No one has any warrant simply to assert that he knows these to be true. All judgments based on sense perception and all mathematical propositions could be false since any one of them might be. Only the act of thinking all these possible false propositions could not be set aside, and thus Descartes' confidence in the fact that he, a *res cogitans*, exists is the first successful upshot of the application of his method.

If one wanted a full-blooded alternative to Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle, surely this is it. In terms of the encyclical, Descartes can be seen as rejecting the notion of an Implicit Philosophy, that is, knowledge claims that have status prior to and independently of the activity of the philosopher. It is not sufficiently noticed that on the

Cartesian alternative the first justifiable knowledge claim is the *result of*, not a *presupposition* to formal philosophizing.

Clearly, the encyclical's claim that there is a body of truths, an implicit philosophy that provides a reference-point for every philosophical system is false —unless the claim is meant to incorporate philosophical systems which deny implicit philosophy. There are some —Cornelio Fabro is one of them— who would characterize the modern turn precisely as denying such an implicit philosophy.

Perhaps a more fruitful way of understanding the introduction of Implicit Philosophy is to see it as a primary task of any philosophical system to make explicit that implicit philosophy. That is, to link its, implicit philosophy's, characteristic claims to what, when formulated, will have the ring of the self-evident. This suggests a barefoot characterization, *ut ita dicam*, of "implicit philosophy" and its relationship to "explicit (that is formal) philosophy".

1. One who begins the study of philosophy has been around for some years. He has been raised in a certain culture, learned a given language, thought and spoken for years about himself and the world. An obvious first consideration in beginning the formal study of philosophy is to ask how it relates to all that cognitive and verbal activity which preceded it.

2. One possibility would be to say to the tyro: forget all that. Everything you have previously thought or said is hopelessly muddled. It arose out of a hundred sources, some discernible, some not. Think of your tendency to say X. (The value of X could be "The world is flat", "The moon is made of green cheese", or "2 + 2 = 4"). How do you really know? So let's start from scratch.

3. But whence the itch? And what language are we using in Lecture One? The student is likely to suspect that not everything can be set aside that easily. He might think that unless he knows what knowing is —has some or many instantiations of it—, he will be unable to assess what philosophy promises him. Unless of course

there is no relationship between what the philosopher calls knowing and what everyone else does. Among the papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, often a sensible fellow, there is a piece called "The Ethics of Vocabulary". In it Peirce suggests that philosophy must devise a technical language on the model of botany, full of neologisms, phony Greek derivatives, etc. so that there will be no question of confusing what the philosopher means and what anyone else does. It is interesting that Peirce says all this in English. In order to learn Philosophese, its terminology would have to put into relationship with the language of the learner. This makes clear that the habitat at least of what the encyclical calls Implicit Philosophy is an inescapable reference point of any philosophical system.

Call this the minimalist understanding of Implicit Philosophy. The fact is that any introduction to formal philosophy has to address novices where they are. Reflection on the fact that communication is possible undermines the notion that the addressee begins such study by knowing nothing. The encyclical encourages reflection on what the cognitive condition of the potential philosopher is. The suggestion is that such reflection will turn up such items as the encyclical lists as part of the cognitive repertoire of the postulant, and the recognition of that content could have a powerful effect on how we assess the plurality of philosophical systems.

At its outset, then, *Fides et ratio* dares to say some blindingly obvious things about philosophical initiation. In these remarks, I have perhaps made the obvious obscure. But, as Kierkegaard asks, why else do we have philosophers, except to make the simple difficult? Of course the obvious contains mysteries, in proof of which I will end with Richard Wilbur's little poem, the subject of which was Doctor Johnson's refutation of Bishop Berkeley's claim that all is thought, *esse est percipi.*

Kick at the rock, Sam Johnson.
Break your bones.
But cloudy, cloudy.
Is the stuff of stones.