

GATEKEEPER OF SMALL MISTAKES:
AN EXAMPLE OF THE PHILOSOPHER'S "OTHER" VOCATION

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Aristotle and Aquinas rightly identified the philosopher's vocation as one that seeks and acquires wisdom. This wisdom is found in the knowledge of first principles and causes, with the result that the philosopher is one who puts things in order—who puts things in their proper place.¹ Over the course of intellectual history, however, there have been many changes concerning this classical understanding of the philosopher's vocation. This is true not only for philosophy's own self-understanding, but also for the way that other disciplines and the general public perceive philosophers as well. In addition, recent developments in science and technology and the serious significance of many current ethical controversies have also contributed to these changes.

From a certain perspective, Descartes' endeavor to make philosophy and the philosophic method more like science and the scientific method may well be the origin of the most recent changes. Decades later, the many noteworthy truths and successes of Newton's work served to ratify and reinforce Descartes' ideal. In the process, the ancient and medieval kinship between science and philosophy, where science and philosophy shared a common search for "explanatory knowledge through causes," was replaced by the modern idea that only useful knowledge, as a consequence of the method of the natural or experimental sciences, has any real value. Indeed, over the past two centuries, we have witnessed a steady ascendancy of the influence of the experimental, natural sciences and, in the twentieth century, of the social sciences as well. However, over this same period of time, we have witnessed the steady decline of the cultural influence of philosophy. In general, many people today see philosophy as some form of esoteric scholarly game that is of use and delight only to the players of the

¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Nichomachean Ethics* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1964), 6.

game themselves. As a result, philosophy and philosophers today are notable for their general absence from the many various forums of public discourse. Philosophers have not been intentionally excluded; rather, since the public thinks philosophy is not "scientific," philosophers generally have been consigned to the dustbin of cultural irrelevance. One pertinent example of this form of disregard should suffice.

In 2000, ABC produced a TV Special on "Happiness," hosted by John Stossel. This entire 90-minute program considered only the psychological (as opposed to the ethical) notion of happiness; it consulted and interviewed no less than ten scientists (including seven psychologists). Not one philosopher appeared during the entire show! When a program on happiness entirely excludes any discussion about the concept of *eudaimonia*, it is a sure sign that the psychological idea of happiness has replaced the philosophical, ethical notion of happiness: the scientific study of "feeling good" has replaced the ethical study of "being good" or living a good life. Moreover, the content of this TV program underscores the presumption that only the sciences provide any validly useful knowledge.

The significance of this shifted focus also appears in the many serious contemporary ethical debates, especially those that have grave consequences for ordinary human life. Today, it is the social and biological scientists, joined by legal scholars and political pundits, who are the acknowledged public sources of authority in ethics, while philosophers are politely but rather conspicuously ignored. Our culture's bewitchment with the sciences might be considered a somewhat predictable and banal reflection of society's love for the pragmatic benefits of technology were it not for the fact that the dizzying proliferation and complexity of scientific achievement has led to so many serious ethical issues. The biological sciences in particular raise a host of ethical controversies that go beyond the strict subject matter of biology proper. Accordingly, since no science can be the judge of its own first principles, the time is long overdue for philosophers, especially realist philosophers, to reassert the "other" responsibility of their once nobly regarded profession; they need to become the gatekeepers of those proverbial "small mistakes in the

beginning that lead to large errors in the end.”² This is especially true concerning those first principles about human nature which serve as the starting points for the biological and social sciences; if these principles are mistaken, they become perfect examples of those initial small mistakes that lead to very serious ethical consequences in the end.

A specific example of this call for philosophical vigilance concerning the principles of human nature can be found within the discipline of philosophy itself. In ethicist Peter Singer’s 2002 book, *Unsanctifying Human Life*,³ the author argues forcefully against the idea that humans possess any unique, inherent dignity and sanctity. Singer’s position accepts the scientific claim that human nature has an entirely materialist explanation. In the process, he fuels the idea that the human species has no real intrinsic value that transcends the “inherent” value that he sees all species possessing. Indeed, for the front cover of his book, Singer makes an amusingly oxymoronic but mocking use of Michelangelo’s “Creation of Adam” from the Sistine Chapel—talk about poking God’s finger in your eye!⁴

1. Ideas That Need “A Good Scrubbing”

In an essay from Singer’s book, one that shares the book’s title, “Unsanctifying Human Life,” the author remarks that the “doctrine of the sanctity of human life is a legacy of attitudes and beliefs that were once widespread, but which few people would now try to defend.”⁵ For Singer, the idea that human nature has any unique, inherent dignity and sanctity that transcends nonhuman animals is nothing more than a historical myth that no longer has any relevance in academic, scholarly, or scientific circles—it is, he says, “the historically conditioned product of doctrines...which hardly anyone now accepts;

² “A slight initial error eventually grows to vast proportions.” St. Thomas Aquinas, *On Being And Essence*, trans. Armand Maurer, C.S.B. (Toronto, Canada: Pontifical Institute Of Medieval Studies, 1968), 28.

³ Peter Singer, *Unsanctifying Human Life* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell., 2002).

⁴ Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 78.

⁵ Singer, *Unsanctifying Human Life*, 228.

doctrines so obnoxious, in fact, that if anyone did accept them, we would be inclined to discount any other moral views he held.”⁶ Ouch! For Singer, there is no, nor can there be any, valid rational argument for a spiritual/intellectual dimension of human nature. Singer accepts as so scientifically certain the Darwinian claim that the human species differs only in degree from nonhuman primates that he does not consider as a respectable intellectual possibility any challenge to this assertion. Singer’s conclusion in this regard is emphatic: “Although advocates of the doctrine of the sanctity of human life now frequently try to give their position some secular justification, there can be no possible justification for making the boundary of sanctity run parallel with the boundary of our own species, unless we invoke some *belief* about immortal souls.”⁷

Ironically, it is precisely such a rational argument for the existence of a spiritual intellect that Mortimer Adler, following Aquinas, does provide in his 1967 book, *The Difference of Man and the Difference It Makes*. There is a summarized version of this purely rational argument in the text,⁸ and a lengthy and highly technical version (i.e., seven single-spaced pages!) in his endnotes.⁹ Sadly, as his a priori dismissal necessitates, Singer now pokes his fingers in his ears! The sad truth is that the substance and logic of Adler’s argument, with all of the subtleties of its realist, Thomist vocabulary, is generally so far removed from contemporary philosophical discourse that it quite understandably falls on deaf ears.

And so the conclusion goes: since Singer’s position conforms to the a priori assumption about the truth of the entirely materialist hypothesis of science, Singer is to be taken seriously; by contrast, since Adler’s position does not conform to the a priori assumption about the truth of the exclusively materialist hypothesis of science, Adler is not to be taken seriously. The problem with this line of reasoning, obviously, is that Adler’s position is not rationally rebutted or refuted; it is simply

⁶ Singer, *Unsanctifying Human Life*, 230.

⁷ *Ibid.*; my emphasis.

⁸ Mortimer J. Adler, *The Difference of Man and the Difference it Makes* (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1967), 220-22.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 340-47.

ignored. Those materialists, who incline toward this line of reasoning and who hold that there can be no spiritual dimension of human nature because it goes beyond the experimental limits of empirical science, will quite naturally conclude that to reach a contrary conclusion, Adler must be invoking some form of belief or faith-claim, which he, of course, does not do.

Not surprisingly, being dismissed in this way is not unique to the writings and ideas of Mortimer Adler alone. Jacques Maritain too received his share of intellectual disregard. Maritain's intuitions concerning the myriad modern metaphysical mistakes, with their linguistic tower of philosophical babble, was decades ahead of its time. In his 1969 book, *The Peasant of the Garonne*, Maritain remarks that he is fed up with sociological or descriptive portraits of the times. What concerns him, he says, is not the "value of the times," but rather the "values which have an impact on them." He writes, "It is not our era that worries me, but the ideas one runs into at every street corner, some of which could certainly stand a good scrubbing."¹⁰ Since theoretical ideas do have practical consequences, they represent the first principles of values on which we depend...and which characterize and define our times. Perhaps even more importantly than our loss of specific philosophic truths, Maritain also lamented the more basic loss of what he called the knowledge of "pre-philosophy," that fundamental, inherent common sense of human intelligence. In the absence of this, many modern and contemporary philosophers find themselves caught in an intellectual Catch-22 of their own making—they need common sense intelligence to see the error of their "small mistakes," all the while that they doubt the very veracity of this common sense intelligence itself! "Bring on the fables!" Maritain says, "... as disoriented as we are, we must go on thinking anyway."¹¹

One such fable concerns the human effort to understand the truth about human nature. Without a rational demonstration of the spiritual dimension of human nature, there is no rational defense of any *intrinsic* dignity and sanctity of the human person. When those, like Singer, who dismiss a priori the explanation of a spiritual dimension of human

¹⁰ Maritain, *The Peasant*, 20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

nature as nothing more than a matter of religious belief, their entirely materialist assumption lays the foundation for those serious value-problems that result whenever the dignity and sanctity of human life is not intrinsic. From abortion, euthanasia, and capital punishment, to all of the forms of economic, social, racial, and gender inequality and injustice, the "consistent ethic of life" that the Catholic Church champions depends upon the rational affirmation of the inherent dignity and sanctity of human nature. And this, of course, can only be found in the spiritual reality of human nature, the very concept that Singer denies. And so we ask: how did it come to this? How did humans come to think so poorly about themselves as a natural species? Perhaps the answer to this question is to be found in philosophy after all; as Woodrow Wilson famously remarked: "Men [and women] die, ideas live." And so it is that, over the past few centuries, several philosophical errors, as the ideas that have served as the starting points for subsequent ethical consequences, have contributed to this lamentable state of affairs. Descartes may be dead, but the influence of his (and subsequent enlightenment thinkers') ideas lives on.

2. *Unsing* Singer's Song of Unsanctity

Darwin's great scientific achievements get the question-begging ball rolling. Today, Darwin's materialist claim that the human animal differs only in degree from the rest of the primates from whom humans have evolved is perhaps more precisely explained as a "superficial difference in kind," i.e., an observable difference in kind (evidenced by the human ability to think conceptually) that is *explained* by an underlying difference in the degree of complexity of the human central nervous system involving a critical threshold. This explanation, of course, is still fundamentally a materialist explanation. And so, while immaterialists may dismiss Darwinian materialism *a priori* as incompatible with the Christian claim that humans are "spirit-incarnate" (and as such are "made in the image and likeness of God"), materialists for their part dismiss the idea that humans possess a spiritual dimension, as not rationally defensible. Remarkable as this may seem, Maritain suggested the possibility of reconciling these two positions—the materialist claim about evolution with the immaterialist claim about a spiritual dimension of human nature that occurs through

divine intervention in history—in a seminar that he delivered in the late sixties, “Toward a Thomist Idea of Evolution;”¹² Pope John Paul II announced a similar position of compatibility in the nineties. But never mind; historically, Darwin’s materialist hypothesis continued to be ratified through the contributions of paleo-anthropology in the latter part of the nineteenth century, then by comparative psychology at the turn of the twentieth century, followed by cybernetics in mid-century and, in the last half of the twentieth century, by the advancing work of neurology and brain research.¹³ With the materialist hypothesis so scientifically persuasive and pervasive, the materialists completely ignored the rational argument that rescues the moderate immaterialist position:¹⁴ the position that argues in favor of the claim that human beings do possess a spiritual dimension which not only alone accounts for their abilities to understand and to love in ways that are unique to the human species, but which also establishes their intrinsic dignity and sanctity.

With all of this in mind, it should come as no real surprise that all ten of the errors identified by Mortimer Adler in his book, *Ten Philosophical Mistakes*,¹⁵ concern some relation to the first principles of human nature. Understand human nature incorrectly, and all ten of these mistakes result. The origin of the first five errors, all of which concern epistemology and ethics, are enlightenment errors that pre-date Darwin’s scientific achievements. They are the subtle mistakes that set the stage for the more attention-getting ethical errors that would follow. Although they are primarily philosophical errors, they lay a foundation of compatibility with the future claims of scientific materialism.

Specifically, in chapter one, Adler corrects the most subtle and difficult of epistemological errors concerning human consciousness and its object by distinguishing between private, subjective experience

¹² Cf. Jacques Maritain, *Untrammelled Approaches*, trans. Bernard Doering (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 1997), Chap. VI, “Toward A Thomist Idea Of Evolution,” 85-131.

¹³ Cf. Adler, *The Difference of Man*, 41ff.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 223.

¹⁵ Mortimer J. Adler, *Ten Philosophical Mistakes* (New York: Macmillan, 1985).

and public, objective experience. This in turn involves the realist/idealist disagreement concerning the function of ideas for consciousness—for realism, ideas are “that by which” the mind apprehends things (ideas are a *quo*), while for idealism, ideas are “that which,” those “things” that the mind apprehends directly (ideas are a *quod*).¹⁶ Chapters two through five correct the mistakes that follow from this first error and include distinguishing (1) sense powers and sense knowledge from the intellect and intellectual knowledge (chapter 2); (2) the difference in kind between perceptual and conceptual thought (chapter 3); (3) the true meaning of *episteme* (as distinguished from *doxa*) (chapter 4); and (4) the contrast between descriptive and prescriptive judgments (chapter 5).¹⁷

These distinctions themselves ultimately depend upon the metaphysics of the spiritual dimension of human intelligence and, consequently, human nature. The failure to understand the correct explanation of human nature leads to the failure to make these distinctions; the failure to make these distinctions leads to significant though subtle errors in thinking which are those small mistakes in the beginning that result in serious ethical consequences in the end.

Specifically, if one blurs the distinction between “that by which” and “that which,” one ends up denying the common sense foundation of realism, that the mind truly knows reality. Make this mistake and the track leading to Humean and Kantian skepticism (a result of the split between noumenal and phenomenal reality) is assured and only the “likely truths” of science will be thought to provide any real and useful knowledge. Truth, as the conformity of the mind with reality, is gone, and in its place is the post-modern conclusion that truth and reality are only a matter of perspective.

Next, should one blur the distinction between sense powers and sense knowledge and the intellect and intellectual knowledge, one ends up ratifying Descartes’ error of equating the mind with soul. Make this mistake and the materialist hypothesis (in the explanation of human nature) quite logically concludes that “soul” (and hence any spiritual dimension of our nature) is but an unnecessary hypothesis, a

¹⁶ See also Adler, *The Difference of Man*, 341.

¹⁷ Adler, *Mistakes*, 5-127.

multiplication of terms. As a result, this thinking leads to the conclusion that "soul" is nothing more than a "Ghost in the Machine," an unreal and unnecessary term that violates the logical principle of parsimony.

The next mistake conflates the distinction between perceptual and conceptual knowledge and, when combined with the previous error, falsely confirms the idea that these kinds of knowing—and hence human nature itself—differ only in degree, not kind, from other nonhuman animals. Make this mistake and Singer's song is complete: according to him, the sin of speciesism is grounded in what he holds to be the erroneous claim that the human animal has any spiritual uniqueness and, as a consequence, that it would have an *inherent* dignity and sanctity that gives it a superiority over other life forms.

What might we say in reply? The truth is that intrinsic dignity and sanctity can only come from the human possession of a spiritual dimension that is given through a causal participation with the Divine Creator; only in this way is the human species different in kind from, and transcendent over, nonhuman animals.¹⁸ Such a conclusion makes clear the importance of Adler's (and St. Thomas's!) articulation of the rational argument for the spiritual dimension of human nature. Without the truth of this rational argument, all and any attempts to assign to humans some measure of dignity and sanctity must, by definition, be *extrinsically* bestowed. The consistent ethics of life can only be defended and affirmed through a rational argument for the human difference in kind from other animals. In this way, only, is Singer's song of unsanctity unsung.

This rational argument for the spiritual dimension of human nature provides but one example of a gate-keeping rational defense of the preambles of faith that ought to be the vocation of all Catholic, realist philosophers of common sense. In this regard, Jacques Maritain, our beloved "peasant of the Garonne," along with his friend, Mortimer

¹⁸ Another matter of equal importance, though one that goes beyond the scope of this paper, concerns the idea that, even though we are transcendent over other life forms, we are nonetheless called to be caretakers of God's creation, and not dominating exploiters. This position is fully compatible with the idea of responsibility that accompanies human transcendence.

Adler, may rightly be regarded as model gatekeepers of small mistakes. They defended the truth of those rational first principles that, if uncorrected, lead to large errors in the end, errors that endanger the ethical values of not just the present age but future ages as well.