

WHY PHILOSOPHERS DISAGREE



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NY human good depends on a large number of things going right, whereas a bad thing can result from just one of these gone wrong. An otherwise perfect ball player is no good on the field if he is struck blind. The most sublime meal at the world's finest restaurant is spoiled by just one cockroach in the mashed potatoes. The same goes for a liberal education. Such an education cannot come about unless a thousand things go right, and just one thing gone wrong can ruin it entirely. If I possess all the moral qualities that a liberal education demands, such as wonder, humility, self-discipline, and a love of wisdom, only I lack the requisite intelligence, I cannot succeed. Or if my IQ is stellar and my SAT scores are through the roof, but I cannot take a serious interest in anyone's ideas but my own, I can never truly receive a liberal education, however much I might appear to.

Tonight I aim to talk about just two out of the thousand things that must go right if liberal education is to take place. One of these is disagreement. In our conversations here at Thomas Aquinas College, we find that many of our authors disagree, and also we ourselves disagree, both with our authors and with each other. Disagreement can be a very unpleasant thing, and, even when it is friendly, if it never resolves it can also be a very discouraging thing. Unless we learn the causes and uses of disagreement, and develop a healthy and informed attitude toward it, we cannot long persevere in the life of the mind.

The other thing necessary to liberal education that I intend to discuss is first principles. Aristotle opens his *Posterior Analytics* with the observation that all teaching and intellectual learning come to be from pre-existing knowledge. Since I have been alive only a finite time, my intellectual life must have begun from certain ultimate sources, such as sense experience, and certain foundational statements called first principles. By a *principle* I here mean a statement from which we deduce other statements and gain conviction about them. The Pythagorean Theorem is a principle, for example, since from it we reason to other statements in geometry. But the Pythagorean Theorem is itself deduced from other statements more evident to us. The Pythagorean Theorem, in other words, is not a *first* principle, since there are other principles before it.

A first principle is a principle with *no* principle before it, a principle not deducible from any statements more known to us than it. For example, *The whole is greater than the part*. First principles like that are the beginnings of all of philosophy, whether we take *philosophy* in the broad sense or in the narrow. In the narrowest sense of the word, *philosophy* names a single science about the causes and properties of all beings, a discipline traditionally called *metaphysics* or *first philosophy* or simply *wisdom*. In a broader sense, *philosophy* includes the whole order of arts and sciences that prepare the mind for first philosophy, or that imitate it and participate in its nature in some way. These disciplines include grammar, logic, mathematics, natural science, music theory, literary and historical studies, ethics, and political philosophy, which, taken together with first

philosophy, and arranged in a pedagogical order, constitute a liberal education. If we now include sacred theology besides, which has even more fully the nature of wisdom than first philosophy does, and for which first philosophy itself is a preparation, we have a Catholic liberal education, and all its parts are called *philosophy* in a broad sense. And all of philosophy, taken in that broad sense, depends on first principles.

The two things I want to talk about tonight, disagreement and the first principles of philosophy, are intimately connected. We can begin to see this by asking the question implied in the title of this talk, “Why do philosophers disagree?” That they disagree is clear enough. Some philosophers say there is a God, and some do not. Some say there is an objective right and wrong, and some do not. Some say that space and time are something real outside our minds, and some say the opposite. Probably everything said by someone called a philosopher has been contradicted by someone else who was also called a philosopher. Why should that be the case? The answer has to do with first principles.

Twenty eight years ago I attended a lecture in this very room given by one of our founding tutors, Mark Berquist. His title was *Where Philosophers Disagree*. His talk inspired this one, and his title inspired mine. His thesis was that while philosophers disagree about many things, about everything under the sun (and above it), they disagree most characteristically and most fundamentally about first principles. Their disagreement over first principles, their starting points, is the main cause of their disagreement over most other matters on which they disagree. He verified this inductively, as we will soon do ourselves, but for the moment let us take it as a fact that philosophers frequently disagree about first principles. This in turn becomes a major cause of their disagreement about other things. When two philosophers disagree about whether God’s existence is demonstrable, whether the soul is immortal, whether lying is wrong, whether democracy is the only legitimate form of government, whether free trade is a good thing, and so on, nine times out of ten it is at least in part because they do not agree on their first principles.

While their disagreement over first principles goes a long way toward explaining why philosophers disagree about their conclusions, it forces us to wonder why they disagree about first principles. There are in fact many reasons. Sometimes one philosopher disagrees with another's first principles due to something going on in his will, whether something blameworthy such as pride or stubbornness, or something defective but not morally so, such as a habitual attachment to certain ideas and ways of thinking, or a distrust of another thinker whom he has not had an adequate opportunity to realize is smarter than himself. Sometimes one philosopher simply hasn't taken the time to read the other philosopher carefully enough. But if such deficiencies were the chief causes of disagreement among the philosophers, then they would be a sorry bunch. Philosophers would disagree not because of anything inherent in the nature of philosophy itself, but only because those who have called themselves philosophers up to now have been either stupid, or lazy, or stubborn, or narrow-minded, or prejudiced. Now some are lazy, some are stubborn, and all are to some extent prejudiced, just like the rest of humanity. But none are stupid. The philosophers are geniuses who have shaped the world with the power of their ideas. So on the one hand, we have the intelligence of the philosophers, and on the other, we have their disagreement over first principles. How can we reconcile these things? How can philosophers fail to agree on the very first things in philosophy?

That is the question I want to ask, and here is my answer to it, the thesis of my talk: *The chief intellectual cause of disagreement among philosophers is not that no truth or certainty is possible in philosophy, but that the human path to wisdom about first principles necessarily passes through disagreement about them.* It is hard work just to form the right disagreements in philosophy, and so not all philosophers get as far as the resolutions of those disagreements which finally bring us to wisdom. Disagreement, in other words, is not just an occupational hazard in philosophy, it's part of the job.

THREE TYPES OF PRINCIPLES

To begin making my thesis evident, I must distinguish three different types of first principles in philosophy. (And here, remember, I am taking *philosophy* to mean the whole life of the mind, including sacred theology, modern science, mathematics, and the critical reading of literature.)

The first type of first principle is the sort we encounter in Euclid, such as the ten statements he lays before us at the outset of his *Elements*. For example: *All right angles are equal*, or *The whole is greater than the part*. These statements are self-evident, by which I mean that their truth is known to us as soon as we understand well enough what they mean. This is one type of first principle, then, the self-evident truth.

In modern science, we encounter a very different type of first principle which is not self-evident but explanatory. For example, *A ray of light in gravity-free empty space travels at the same velocity relative to all inertial observers*. This daunting statement is probably true, and we reason from it to other things. So it is a principle. But it is far from self-evident. Then why call it a first principle? Because it is not deducible from other statements better known to us. Instead, we deduce other things from it, and check to see whether they fit with experience. Unlike a self-evident principle, which we know is true in itself and by which we judge the truth of its consequences, an explanatory principle is something we do not know in itself, but by the truth of its consequences we judge the truth of the principle.

A third type of first principle is a statement that is believed on the authority of another science. When physicists employ the Pythagorean Theorem, for example, it is for them a first principle, not something deduced from prior statements within their science. That does not mean that nobody knows the truth of it, or that nobody deduces it, but only that it is not deducible from statements proper to physics. In a similar way, theologians adopt as their first principles certain truths revealed by God. Theologians cannot see the truth of these principles themselves, but only that they must be true since they come from the divine

authority. For example, *Baptism confers sanctifying grace*, or *God became man*, or *There are three persons in the one divine nature*, or *The world began to exist*. A theologian adopts such principles not because they are self-evident to us, nor because they are confirmed by experience, but because God has revealed them.

With these three types of first principles in mind, we can inquire in a more definite way whether and why philosophers disagree about them.

Let's begin by considering the third type, the principle borrowed from an authority. We need not worry about principles in physics borrowed from geometry and other such cases. Although geometric truths are principles of the authoritative variety in physics, they are derived from principles of the self-evident variety in geometry, and so the question about them reduces to why philosophers disagree about self-evident first principles, which we shall come to momentarily.

Theology is a different case. Its first principles are not self-evident to any mere mortal. Disagreement about them therefore has a special explanation, although not one that is difficult to grasp. The main reason there is disagreement about these principles is simply that some people believe they come from God and others do not.

There is much to say about why some people have faith and others do not, but that question lies outside my present scope. My question is why philosophers disagree, and the analogs of the philosophers in the realm of Christian faith are the prophets and apostles, those who first transmitted to us the contents of faith in human words. And as it happens, those great philosophers, the prophets and apostles, never disagree in the teachings they have handed down to us. Isaiah does not reject John, nor John Isaiah. Peter does not condemn the teachings of Paul, nor Paul those of Peter.¹ It is only lesser disciples such as

¹ St. Paul does say "When Cephas [i.e., Peter] came to Antioch I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he ate with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party." (Gal 2:11) But this was not a disagreement over doctrine, but Paul finding fault with the behavior and example of Peter—and apparently Peter agreed. And

ourselves who disagree about Christian principles, and that is easy enough to explain—it is due to our very imperfect understanding of our masters.

That is the easiest case to understand, since there is no disagreement among the masters in Christian truth. That remarkable absence of disagreement, however, is due to the divine origin of their knowledge, not to the human element. The divine path to wisdom about first principles does not pass through disagreement about them. So I will say no more about that this evening, since I intend to talk about the human path.

What about the second type of first principle, the explanatory kind? Scientists sometimes disagree about such first principles, for example about Einstein's general principle of relativity as opposed to Newton's universal law of gravitation. Disagreement about conflicting ideas like these persist only so long as there is no decisive test supporting one but excluding the other. Once the differences between the predictions of Newton and Einstein fall within our powers of observation, and the observations all favor Einstein to within experimental error, scientists accept Einstein's principle, since it explains things better than Newton's, and disagreement subsides.²

We now see how my thesis works in the case of modern science. When scientists agree on their first principles, they tend to agree about everything that can be determined by those principles. But the human mind usually cannot begin with pure truth in the science of nature. The human mind must instead begin from good guesses that explain, as well as possible, all the

St. Peter does say "So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures." (2 Pet 3:15-16) But this is Peter warning us that Paul is easily misunderstood, not that Paul is wrong.

² Sometimes two competing hypotheses agree on the observable facts, but some scientists nevertheless prefer one, others the other, because they believe one of the two provides a better or simpler explanation. Copernicus introduced no significant new facts into astronomy, but provided a new understanding of the same facts beginning from hypotheses that conflicted with Ptolemy's. When this happens, sometimes the new understanding is so superior that scientists agree it is the better explanation. Other times, disagreement persists until decisive observations come along. But generally, once decisive observations become available, disagreement dissipates.

phenomena thus far known, and must then refine and revise these guesses as new phenomena become known. Therefore the chief reason why scientists of later generations disagree with those of earlier generations is that scientific principles improve over time with advances in our experience of nature.

In the case of divinely revealed principles, the wise men do not disagree with one another. In the case of the principles of modern science, the wise disagree with one another because that is the way to deeper agreement over time. What about the first type of first principle, self-evident truth? Prior to any reflection, we might think philosophers disagree least about principles that are self-evident. But this is not so. Great thinkers not only disagree about self-evident things, but it is about such principles that they disagree most of all. This kind of disagreement is more difficult to understand than disagreement over the explanatory principles of science. It is even potentially scandalous. How can philosophers disagree over self-evident truths?

A CRITIQUE OF PHILOSOPHY

Unlike modern scientists, who disagree mainly with earlier scientists, philosophers seem to disagree more persistently, and those of a particular generation disagree not only with those who came before them, but also with each other. The French philosopher René Descartes observed this fact about philosophers and offered a reason for it. He said

Whenever the judgments of two persons concerning the same thing are opposed, it is certain that at least one of them is wrong, and there is not even one of them who seems to have knowledge. For if one person's argument were certain and evident, he could propose it in such a way to the other one that

even the latter's mind would eventually be convinced.³

This thinking underlies the mainstream understanding of liberal education today. Here is what I mean. If we think like Descartes, we say to ourselves: *The philosophers always disagree, and although they cannot all be wrong, they must all be ignorant. Even those who happen to say true things cannot really know that what they are saying is true, because if they did, then the means by which they became convinced would be objectively convincing, and so they could convince all the others by the same means by which they themselves became convinced. But they cannot do this, witness their persistent disagreement. Therefore, philosophers do not really know anything.*

If we accept this explanation of disagreement among philosophers, what must we think of philosophy? Either it is truly a form of knowledge, but for some reason no one has yet managed to find the genuine self-evident principles of such knowledge and the way forward from them, or else philosophy is concerned with things about which we cannot have real knowledge. Descartes adopted the first of these alternatives, and took it upon himself to discover for the first time in history the correct self-evident principles of philosophy, and the right way of reasoning from them that would make it possible for everyone in philosophy to agree. He rounded up a number of seemingly self-evident truths on which to found all of philosophy, and reasoned forward from there to the existence of God, the immortality of the human soul, and the laws of nature.

Almost everyone after Descartes accepted his argument for concluding that the philosophers before him did not know anything, but most thinkers after Descartes rejected his ideas

³ Descartes, *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Rule 2, from *Philosophical Essays (Discourse on Method; Meditations; Rules for the Direction of the Mind)*, translated by Laurence J. Lafleur, Macmillan publishing company, New York, 18th printing, 1988, p.150. All other citations of Descartes are from this same volume.

about what the self-evident truths were. By his own argument, therefore, Descartes must not have found the truth, since if he had, he would have convinced everyone else. This same fate befell the other modern philosophers after Descartes, and by degrees the universities of the world began to embrace the idea that real knowledge is simply not possible in philosophy. Mainstream educators today no longer believe, as Descartes did, that philosophical knowledge is possible, just not yet realized in fact. Rather, the current thinking, often left unspoken, is that philosophy is about things we cannot possibly know, since the principles and methods of modern science alone can get us true knowledge, whereas the questions of philosophy are not approachable by such methods.

Our universities accordingly draw a new line between exact sciences and liberal arts, between a scientific education and a liberal one. The implicit rationale for this divide is that we ought to separate knowledge from non-knowledge. If you want genuine knowledge of reality, you must go where genuine knowledge is possible, namely to modern science. If instead you want to talk about deep and provocative things, and you are willing to live without knowing anything, so long as your mind is stimulated or your lifestyle choices are defended, then you can go into philosophy. Philosophy then becomes one of the “humanities,” which, on the modern understanding, means it ranks among those disciplines in which we study not reality and nature (not even human nature), but art and culture—we study not what human beings are or should be, but what human beings have said and made when they expressed themselves on deep questions whose true answers cannot be known but must forever remain matters of opinion.

Is this the correct explanation of the persistence of disagreement among the philosophers?

No, it isn't. One sign of this is that the modern university's implicit argument (the one that concludes that philosophy cannot arrive at knowledge) does not really agree with itself. The

argument itself claims to arrive at knowledge, and yet it is itself a piece of philosophy. Poorly reasoned philosophy, perhaps, but philosophy nonetheless, since it is about philosophy and reasons from a purportedly self-evident statement, namely that *if any one philosopher knew the truth, he could convince all the others*. Here we have a philosophical argument claiming to arrive at the certain knowledge that philosophical argument cannot arrive at certain knowledge.

Descartes was more consistent than our universities, since he (at least ostensibly) believed that philosophical knowledge is possible, though no one before him happened to get any. But even his view is implausible, that philosophy is a real form of knowledge founded on genuinely self-evident principles, and yet, for some reason, no one has found any of those principles after three thousand years of trying. His explanation of philosophical disagreement also self-destructs. His explanation says that any philosophical idea that any philosopher disagrees with cannot be real knowledge. Now many philosophers since the time of Descartes have disagreed with his explanation of philosophical disagreement. Therefore, according to that very explanation, Descartes cannot have known what he was talking about when he said that philosophers who disagree do not know what they are talking about.

Where, then, does the argument against philosophical knowledge go wrong? We cannot doubt the fact that philosophers disagree, and that they seem unable to arrive at a universal consensus. Therefore the other premise must be at fault, the one that says *if any one philosopher knew the truth, he could convince all the others and they would speak the truth unanimously*. In order to avoid the logical inconsistencies I just indicated, we must pronounce this premise false, and accept the opposite view. In other words, we must admit that *Even if one philosopher knew the truth perfectly well, he would not necessarily be able to convince all the others*.

But how is that possible? How can one philosopher really

know the truth about some philosophical matter, know how to deduce it from self-evident first principles, and yet remain unable to convince all other good-willed and intelligent philosophers?

CAUSES OF DISAGREEMENT ABOUT SELF-EVIDENT TRUTHS

The main reason is that philosophers can honestly and intelligently disagree about self-evident things. At first that sounds impossible. But it is not impossible. Although our *first* knowledge of many self-evident principles comes naturally to us, that knowledge of them is inexact, implicit, and bound up in particular cases. An *exact, explicit, and universal* grasp of self-evident principles, on the other hand, which is what philosophy demands, always comes with great difficulty, and only after encountering and resolving very specific disagreements. Consequently, even if one philosopher really knows the truth as deduced from self-evident principles, he might not be able to convince others whose understanding of those same self-evident principles is less perfect or even defective in some way because they have not gone through all the prerequisite disagreements.

This answer raises a new question: how is it possible for one person to have a more perfect understanding of a self-evident principle than someone else? How is it possible to fail to recognize a self-evident principle when it is staring us in the face? If something is self-evident, shouldn't it pose no difficulty of any kind, and be perfectly intelligible to anyone who hears it, and thus be understood equally well by all, especially the philosophers? How is there room for failure or inequality in understanding what is self-evident?

To see these things, let us consider some examples of defects in the understanding of self-evident truth. With each example, I will try to show how we cannot arrive at a perfect understanding of some self-evident truth without first seeing the

force of certain opposing views. That will confirm my thesis that the path to human wisdom about first principles necessarily passes through disagreement.

FIRST EXAMPLE: PROCLUS vs. EUCLID

Back when I was in graduate school, my mother-in-law asked me what I was writing my doctoral thesis on.

“Euclid’s fifth postulate,” I said.

“My goodness,” she replied, “I’m sure I could never understand what *that* is.”

“On the contrary,” I said, “I’m sure you could.” On a sheet of paper I drew a straight line, and from its endpoints drew two other straight lines converging on one another. After explaining what I had drawn, I said that Euclid’s fifth postulate states that the two converging straight lines, if extended far enough, will eventually meet.

“Oh, is that all?” she said. “That’s not so hard. So what are you going to say about it?”

“That it’s self-evident,” I said.

She blinked at me for a few seconds, and said nothing, but I think I could read her mind. She was worried about my sanity. And why not? If something is self-evident, how could it take hundreds of pages to say so?

If seeing the *truth* of a self-evident statement were the same as seeing its *self-evidence*, then I suppose my mother-in-law would have been right to doubt the legitimacy of my thesis project. But these are not in fact the same thing. When Euclid laid down his postulate, every other geometer and philosopher agreed that it was true. Almost none of them agreed that it was self-evident. An early commentator, the Neoplatonic philosopher named Proclus, was one ancient thinker who said that Euclid was wrong to postulate it, that it is not self-evident, but must be

proved. The postulate was relatively long and complicated, Proclus noted, and Euclid himself proved its converse in Proposition 17 of book 1 of the *Elements*.

Proclus therefore set out to prove Euclid's postulate himself. But in the course of his attempt at proof, he employed a statement that could not possibly be evident unless Euclid's fifth postulate was already evident as well.⁴ Without realizing it, Proclus had invoked Euclid's postulate in his very attempt to prove it.

This mistake that Proclus made illustrates how we can see that something is true, but fail to see that it is self-evident. Euclid and Proclus agreed about the truth of the postulate. What they disagreed about was whether it was a first principle, whether it was a self-evident thing or something that should be deduced from self-evident things. If a statement really is self-evident, then seeing what it means guarantees that we will see its truth. That does not guarantee that we will also see that its truth is of the self-evident kind.

Proclus's disagreement with Euclid shows that when the self-evidence of a statement is obscure enough, we must discover its self-evidence by challenging its claim to that status, and by seeing the problems we run into when we try to deduce it from other things. In such cases, the path to wisdom about the first principles runs through disagreement about them.

SECOND EXAMPLE: ARISTOTLE vs. EMPEDOCLES

My next illustration concerns the statement that nature acts for the sake of an end. Aristotle was the first thinker to lay down this principle explicitly.

But some before him (and after) denied it explicitly. Among

⁴ Namely that parallels do not converge or diverge, but maintain a constant distance from one another.

them was Empedocles. Empedocles noticed that good things often come about in the world of nature. Animals and plants grow organs that are good for themselves, for example. And rain and sunshine do a world of good for animals and plants. Being a philosopher, Empedocles asked himself what the reason for all this was. Why did good things happen in nature? Two options presented themselves. Either what is good in nature comes about on purpose, as something sought or intended, or else it results merely by chance, as something unintended. When we pursue something good for ourselves, we know from direct experience that we are acting for the sake of the good in question, and that the good thing results from our prior and definite tendency toward it. We see similar behavior in animals. But when, due to a traffic jam, you miss a flight that ends up crashing in the ocean, you just lucked out, and the preservation of your life did not result from any intention in the natural world.

So the good happens in this world sometimes because something was trying to bring about what is good, and other times it happens just by chance. Empedocles realized these things like anyone else, but, philosopher that he was, he wanted to know which of these causes was first. Which was the prior cause of the good in the world of nature—the desire for what is good, or chance?

From our own experience of ourselves and other animals, we see that mind or sense is required in order to bring about the good intentionally, but not in order to bring it about by chance. The traffic jam does not have a mind of its own, for example. And when the rain falls, it might do good or do harm, but it has no mind to do so. The question then reduces to this: which kind of cause is prior in the world, the kind that acts with something in mind, or the kind that acts without awareness? Well, elements are prior to animals. Elements can be without animals, but not vice versa. So the priority goes to those causes such as the elements that act without mind, which things bring about the good not by having the good in mind, but only by chance.

That is more or less how Empedocles thought, and how many people still think today. Such thinking seems to be confirmed by birth defects and other irregularities, as though

these rare events signaled the hidden truth about nature, that it is just stuff acting in no particular way at all, bringing about only haphazard combinations, some of which happen to be good. Once nature's haphazard interactions hit upon a combination of things that can preserve and reproduce itself, a kind of stability follows, and these combinations usually do what is "good" for themselves. So the good comes about rarely at first, since it is purely by chance, but then, because it is good, it persists, reproduces, and becomes common.

Reasonable though this may seem, closer inspection reveals deep problems. Empedocles thinks the elements have no definite tendency to serve animals, but that this is purely a matter of chance. Very well. But do the elements have no definite tendencies at all? Does rain have no tendency to fall, for example? He does not think that, nor would it be reasonable if he did. Now if the unconscious actions of elements tend toward definite future outcomes, why can't the unconscious actions of living things do so as well? More than that, each element tends toward things that fit with its nature somehow—fire will tend to conform things to itself, to make things hot like itself, for example. Then why can't living things do likewise? Why can't an embryonic horse have an unconscious tendency to work on its own body, and make it more horse-like? For instance, why can't it unconsciously tend toward producing horse eyes, and equine vision? But as soon as we say that, we are saying that the nature of a horse acts for the sake of something, that it acts out of a tendency to produce things that befit a horse.

Empedocles can't get away from nature acting for the sake of something. He must at least admit that the elements act in definite ways that befit themselves. Therefore if he denies that animals and plants grow their parts for the sake of their uses, this cannot be because nature does not act toward definite future results befitting itself, but only because the animals and plants do not have natures—which is precisely what Empedocles believes. He thinks they are mere associations of elements, not new beings in their own right with natures of their own. (That is another important disagreement over a principle, but it is not about how nature acts, but about which things in our experience

really are natural and have a nature.)

Through these considerations, we can begin to discover for ourselves Aristotle's principle that nature acts for the sake of something, which is in fact a self-evident principle, although it is one for which we may also form arguments of a kind. Because the principle is difficult, due to the term *nature*, which is a deep and difficult cause, and obscure because it is less perfect than intelligence (with which we are more familiar), we need to arrive at this principle by considering the impossibility of saying the opposite. We need to think like Empedocles before we can think like Aristotle. Once we have gone down the road of Empedocles and run into certain conflicts with reality, we will be forced into making a statement like the one that Aristotle was the first to make. We will see that his statement that "nature acts for the sake of something" is really saying something self-evident, because to be a nature is to be an internal principle of a definite action, and therefore to be a principle of action toward some definite and agreeable outcome.

We need philosophical disagreements like that between Empedocles and Aristotle before our minds can form self-evident truths that involve thoughts not easily formed, such as the idea of nature, and of an unconscious tendency toward the good. That is why Aristotle considers so many objections to his principle, and why he begins not with the truth as he sees it, but with the view of Empedocles. We have to try thinking out various alternatives and see that they are dead ends, which experience will force us to form a new thought that would not otherwise occur to us, only after which we will realize this new thought is what Aristotle meant all along. Once that is done, we see the truth, and our seeing it no longer depends on the disagreements that led to it. We depend on such a discovery process only to find the self-evident truth, not to understand it once we have found it. What causes us to understand it after we have found it is precisely its self-evidence.

THIRD EXAMPLE: LOCKE vs. HUME

My next illustration concerns the nature of our own ideas. Our general ideas are universals, that is, thoughts that apply equally well to many similar particulars. For example, you have a general idea of what a triangle is, which idea applies equally well to triangles of all descriptions. The English philosopher John Locke, aiming to understand better what a general idea is, reasoned as follows. Your general idea of what a triangle is must be equilateral, since it applies to equilateral triangles and is attributed to them. If your idea of what a triangle is *did not* have its three sides equal to each other, then how could it apply to triangles that *did* have their three sides equal to each other? It would be unlike them, and not exactly applicable to them, but only roughly like them—in which case you could say that an equilateral triangle was *like* a triangle, but not that it *was* one. Since that is false, your general idea of what a triangle is must have all three of its sides equal. For the very same reason, however, it must also have only two of its sides equal, and also none of its sides equal, so that it can apply to isosceles and scalene triangles. From such considerations, Locke concluded that your general idea of a triangle must be equilateral, isosceles, and scalene all at once. But it must also be none of them. It cannot, for example, be isosceles, having only two sides equal, since then it could not apply to equilateral or scalene triangles. For similar reasons, it cannot be equilateral either, or scalene. So it is all three at once, yet also none of them.⁵

Enter the Irish philosopher George Berkeley and the Scottish philosopher David Hume. These gentlemen pushed the

⁵ See John Locke, Book IV, Ch.VII, *Of Maxims*, section 9: “For, when we nicely reflect upon them, we shall find that *general ideas* are fictions and contrivances of the mind, that carry difficulty with them, and do not so easily offer themselves as we are apt to imagine. For example, does it not require some pains and skill to form the general idea of a triangle, (which is yet none of the most abstract, comprehensive, and difficult,) for it must be neither oblique nor rectangle, neither equilateral, equicrural, nor scalenon; but all and none of these at once. In effect, it is something imperfect, that cannot exist;...”

difficulty discovered by Locke to its logical conclusion. Berkeley says it is obviously impossible to form an idea that is equilateral, isosceles, and scalene all at the same time, but also none of them.⁶ He concludes, therefore, that there is no such thing as an abstract general idea of a triangle, one that applies equally well to all possible triangles. Instead, our general idea of a triangle is just a particular one, an instance that stands in for any and all triangles, like one you might draw on the board while demonstrating something of all triangles.⁷ David Hume agrees: “Let any man try to conceive a triangle in general,” he says, “which is neither *Isosceles* nor *Scalene*, nor has any particular length or proportion of sides; and he will soon perceive the absurdity of all the scholastic notions with regard to abstraction and general ideas.”⁸

In this disagreement between Locke on the one hand and Berkeley and Hume on the other, has anyone found the whole truth, and nothing but? In this case, no. Locke makes it clear that he has not fully understood the truth about general ideas, since he makes a general idea a self-contradictory thing, as Berkeley and Hume point out. Berkeley and Hume also have not fully understood the truth about general ideas, since they have effectively denied their existence. Berkeley acknowledges the existence of typical examples, such as a triangle we draw on the blackboard (or picture in our imaginations), and calls these “general” because they stand in for all other particulars. Surely examples exist, too, and they are “general” in a way. Berkeley nevertheless overlooks something that Locke saw better than he did, namely that we predicate general names of more particular things. For example, we say that *Every square is a quadrilateral*. Does the general name *quadrilateral*, in this statement, mean

⁶ *The Principles of Human Knowledge*, Introduction, section 13.

⁷ *Ibid.*, section 12: “I do not deny absolutely there are general ideas, but only that there are any *abstract* general ideas ... I believe we shall acknowledge that an idea which, considered in itself, is particular, becomes general by being made to represent or stand for all other particular ideas of the same sort ... a geometrician ... draws, for instance, a black line of an inch in length: this, which in itself is a particular line, ... represents all particular lines whatsoever; so that what is demonstrated of it is demonstrated of all lines, or, in other words, of a line in general.”

⁸ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section XII, *Of the academical or sceptical philosophy*, Part I, ¶122.

“this particular quadrilateral that I am imagining right now”? If so, we are saying that *Every square is the particular quadrilateral I am imagining right now*, which is absurd. Locke also saw that particular examples, however typical, cannot explain how we arrive at sure knowledge of universal statements, such as *Every triangle has an angle sum equal to two right angles*. If we can never conceive of anything other than individual triangles, how could we ever become convinced that such a statement is true, without exception, of all individual triangles? We have not had time to inspect them all. The only way is if we can form an idea of something common to every possible triangle, and just think about that without paying attention to what is distinctive of this or that particular triangle.

That we can form an idea of what is common to all triangles is evident by experience. We express that general idea in the form of a definition of triangle: *A three-sided plane figure*. Let's examine this idea in light of the difficulties and disagreements of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. Is my general definition of triangle equilateral? Are the three sides equal? The definition only says *A three-sided plane figure*. There is no mention either of equality or inequality among the three sides. The definition neither affirms nor denies that the three sides of a triangle are equal, it is simply neutral on the question. My general idea of a triangle is therefore not actually an idea of an equilateral triangle in particular, but it can become one by adding the idea that all the sides are equal, something the general idea does not say, but also does not forbid.

Locke was half right. My general idea of a triangle is not actually equilateral, isosceles, or scalene in particular. It is actually none of them, as he says. But it is not also all three of them. Instead, it is only *able* to be any one of these three, by the addition of further ideas to which it lies open. And there is nothing contradictory about an idea that is none of these three things, but is able to become any one of them by some further addition, like a block of marble that is able to become any number of statues, but is actually none of them. And as the marble includes any statue that might be carved out of it, the general idea of triangle includes every type of triangle.

Berkeley and Hume were also half right. They rightly concluded that an idea that is equilateral, isosceles, and scalene all at once is a self-contradictory thing, and that we form no such idea. They also saw that it is impossible for a triangle to be none of these. Can you draw or imagine a triangle that is neither equilateral, nor isosceles, nor scalene, but is only able to become one of these? I confess I cannot. But can you form a thought about triangles that attends only to what all triangles have in common, and that ignores or leaves unmentioned what is peculiar to this or that type of triangle? I can, and I dare say you can as well. *Three-sided plane figure* does the trick. That thought remains non-committal as to the ratios among the sides, and yet it succeeds in saying something that must be found in every possible triangle.

Resolving the difficulties in this way, we gain a marvelous insight into the nature of our general ideas. Since it is impossible to form an image of a triangle that is no particular type of triangle, but it is possible to form a general idea of a triangle that is non-committal about the special type of triangle, it follows that our general idea of a triangle is not an image. Nor is it a triangle. Thinking that every idea of a triangle must be an image of a triangle is the hidden assumption in the thinking of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, that leads them into all their difficulties. If we assume that every idea of a triangle is some kind of triangular image in our minds, and we notice that we predicate the general idea of all types of triangles, we will be forced to say that it is all of these and none of these at once, as Locke says. If we assume that every idea of a triangle is some kind of triangular image in our minds, and we notice that it cannot possibly be all three types at once, nor can it abstain from being any of them but must commit to being one, then we will deny the existence of a general idea of a triangle, as Berkeley effectively does. If instead we reject the assumption that every idea of a triangle must be a triangular representation, we can retain the truth on both sides of the disagreement: that we do form an abstract idea of what a triangle is, and also that it cannot possibly be equilateral, isosceles, and scalene at the same time, but precisely because it is abstract, it is in fact none of them. And then we are ready to

see, since it is none of them, and since every picture of a triangle must be one of them, that our general idea of a triangle is not a picture of a triangle.

Without some such disagreement about general ideas, without running into these kinds of problems about them which it takes a philosopher or two to notice, we would almost certainly never realize that our general ideas have such an intriguing nature, and that they cannot be reduced to products of imagination. By means of a process of disagreement and resolution, we have discovered a new and important self-evident principle, that our universal ideas are not images.

REASONS FOR PHILOSOPHICAL HOPE AND COURAGE

So my thesis states, and the history and practice of philosophy confirms, that self-evident truth is not exactly a simple business, paradoxical though that sounds. Our natural grasp of the self-evident is simple, effortless, and extremely certain, but it is also ambiguous, imprecise, mixed up with irrelevant things, and therefore subject to objections we do not at first know how to answer. Deep philosophical agreement about self-evident principles requires a crystal-clear understanding of them, which in turn demands that we pass first through intelligent disagreement and difficulties about them. Philosophers themselves are not exempt from following this thorny path to the truth.

An urgent question now forces itself upon our attention, a question that everyone serious about liberal education must countenance at some point. If the philosophers persist in their disagreements, then who are we to think we can see who is right? How dare we hope to sort out the disagreements of the philosophers when they themselves cannot seem to sort them out?

When I was in graduate school, a friend of mine once said to me that we can listen to the great conversation, but we cannot

take part in it. That is, we can understand what the philosophers are saying to one another, but we cannot know who is right, since we are not as smart as the philosophers, and they themselves cannot resolve their disagreements.

Another fellow graduate student once told me he thought philosophy was just a bunch of words. That is a fair description of philosophy badly done, or else of good philosophy badly taught. Philosophy is usually taught without any kind of resolution, so that one comes away from it with a sense of endless disagreement, of questions without answers. Even some philosophers have decided that philosophy is impossible, that it begins in wonder and ends in confusion and disagreement.

When I once described to my brother John this philosophical position, he immediately pronounced it false. “Even a cursory reading of the *Symposium*,” he said, “reveals that philosophy does not end in disagreement. It ends in drunkenness.” (I observed that this was true only for the lesser philosophers at the party; for Socrates, it ended in a sober willingness to continue on.) The stoic Epictetus also saw that philosophy does not *end* in disagreement.⁹ Rather, he said, it *begins* in disagreement. You have not really got going as a philosopher until you have engaged in disagreements. Intelligent disagreement about something important is just the sort of thing to get a philosopher’s heart rate up. It is a sign that there is a principle lurking about among all the contrary-seeming bits of evidence, ours to discover if only we can sort things out.

Still, knowing that the truth is there to be found is not the same as knowing how to find it. Unless we are geniuses in need of no assistance, how do we tell truth from error among the

⁹ “The beginning of philosophy is this: the being sensible of the disagreement of men with each other; an inquiry into the cause of this disagreement; and a disapprobation and distrust of what merely seems; a careful examination into what seems, whether it seem rightly; and the discovery of some rule which shall serve like a balance, for the determination of weights; like a square, for distinguishing straight and crooked. This is the beginning of philosophy.” Epictetus, from *Discourses*, Book 2, *The Beginning of Philosophy*, translation by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, 1890.

philosophers? How do we humble students of greater minds decide when the philosophers have found genuine self-evident principles and when they have not?

One way is to learn the types and signs of genuine self-evident statements from the few great philosophers who have bothered about such things. In Plato's dialogue called the *Phaedo*, Socrates consoles his friends (who are about to witness his execution) with a number of probable arguments showing that the human soul existed before and independently of the body, and consequently that it can exist after the body as well. His friends are excited by this great step toward wisdom, by the prospect of life after death. But then a fellow named Cebes objects to the argument, exposing a serious flaw in it. All of the friends of Socrates are immediately thrown into the depths of despair, downcast to learn that what had seemed so strong an argument for so great and desirable a thing should be so easily dispatched. Seeing their reaction, Socrates tells them they should be ashamed of themselves. They are like people who immediately place their full trust in everyone they meet, who are subsequently betrayed by someone, and thereafter decide never to trust anyone again. That is ridiculous. Not everyone deserves trust, but some people do, and we ought to learn the difference. In a similar way, not every argument deserves trust, and among those that do, not all deserve the same kind of trust, or equal trust, and we ought to learn the differences. That is a rough description of the art of logic. Lest we become irrational haters of arguments, we must become lovers of logic. Something similar can be said about witnesses in a court of law, or about our own senses—we cannot always trust them, but never trusting them is entirely unreasonable and impossible. We should take the trouble to learn when they can be trusted and when not.

We must speak in a similar way about self-evident truths. We can trust all self-evident truths, of course, but we cannot trust that all statements seeming to be self-evident truly are, just as not everything seeming to be an argument really is one. We must

learn that not all self-evident truth is easy to come to see, or to see well, and that we therefore need to acquire wisdom about self-evident truths—about their nature, their kinds, their order, about how to recognize them and how to extricate them from the main difficulties that surround them. Once we realize this, we will begin to equip ourselves with ways of telling when philosophers have found a principle, and when they have not, or not perfectly. And, like Socrates, we should not let the greatness of the philosophers cow us, but take heart that they will be able to teach us, even if they cannot always teach each other.

The logical study of the way to discover self-evident truths is something everyone can attempt, but most people, and even most philosophers, neglect it. Most philosophers proceed as though the first principles were a quick and easy business, as if the only serious work is that of building a system on the first principles. They think the foundation is easy to lay, and that raising a large edifice upon it is the important thing, and that successful philosophizing requires only a personal ingenuity uncommon among human beings. Philosophers like that might be brilliant, might raise important questions and make many new discoveries. But they are unlikely to have real wisdom about principles. Perhaps they will have discovered or pointed the way to some hitherto unnoticed principles, but they will also reject or overlook others. Consequently, we should not expect most philosophers to agree, since most of them do not possess wisdom about the first principles, but only possess some understanding of some of them, even if it is an uncommonly good understanding.

Recognizing this difference among the philosophers helps mitigate the temptation to despair. Only *some* of the philosophers acknowledge the need to sort out difficulties about first principles by weighing the opposing views of other philosophers. Consequently, only *some* philosophers have given us a reason to think they possess real wisdom about the first principles, and not just an ingenuity by which to discover some principles on their

own while perhaps doing violence to others. Only among those philosophers¹⁰ who take seriously opposing views about the first principles should we expect a significant amount of agreement about important questions—and when we study those philosophers, we find indeed that they agree much more than they disagree. Plato and Aristotle, for example, are among the few philosophers who insisted on the great difficulty of acquiring an adequate understanding of the first principles, and these two philosophers also agree about more things than they disagree about. There is even more agreement than disagreement between them about the very things on which they disagree, such as the existence of separate forms.¹¹

A further reason we should dare to look for the truth despite the disagreements among those smarter than ourselves is the special advantage of the faithful. Christian revelation can function as a philosopher's cheat-sheet. Divine revelation does not tell us all the answers to the great questions of philosophy, but does tell us many of them, and especially the answers to the most ultimate questions. According to the prophets of the Christian religion (those wise men who so remarkably agree), there is one God, and the world of nature reveals that fact, and the human soul is immortal, the human will is free, there is an objective moral order, and the world began to be. Such assertions contain many implications, and analysis of them will bring us to many self-evident principles. With these helpful hints of revelation, it is much easier to tell which principles are sound, which specious, which problems are merely problems admitting of solution, which are actual refutations. And this way of sorting

¹⁰ Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle certainly number among such philosophers: "Every man should expend his chief thought and attention on the consideration of his first principles—are they or are they not rightly laid down? And when he has duly sifted them, all the rest will follow." *Cratylus*, 436d.

¹¹ Aristotle agrees with Plato that such forms exist, although in the soul, not always in things outside the soul, but even at that, he agrees that sometimes such forms exist outside the soul, too, namely in God, who, Aristotle saw, is the good itself, and wisdom itself, subsisting by itself.

out the truth among the philosophers does not imply that we are smarter than the philosophers, but that God is.

Does that mean we should give up philosophy and do theology instead? That we should abandon knowing and replace it with believing? Not at all. That is not how revelation guides philosophy. The German mathematician Bernhard Riemann once said that if only he knew the theorems he would be able to discover the proofs. Tell me the truth, and I will be able to find the evidence for it, and then I will know it for myself. My math students often experience this sort of thing. I tell them something new they don't yet know to be true, and send them off to find a proof. Then they do. But they would never have found the proof had I not told them the conclusion first. Their discovery of proofs under guidance like this demonstrates not so much their own intelligence as the intelligence of the original discoverer of the theorems in whose footsteps they are following. In the same way, Christian revelation enables students of philosophy (such as ourselves) to make discoveries that lie beyond the power of our own intelligence to make unassisted. Once we make the philosophical discoveries with divine assistance, however, we really see the philosophical truth for ourselves. We do not merely believe.

COROLLARIES

You have now heard some illustrations of my thesis that philosophers disagree because disagreement is part of the human path to wisdom, even to the first principles of wisdom. There is no philosophy worth knowing, deep and wise and true, that is not born of disagreement, and of problem-raising and problem-solving. And not just historically, or in its original discovery, but also in its teaching and learning. Just look at the *Summa theologiae* of St. Thomas. It is half occupied with opposing views and the resolution of them. Disagreement can be

an obstacle to truth, but it is not purely that. It is also a necessary means to it.

Now I will leave you with certain corollaries of my thesis.

First among these is that in the classroom we should embrace disagreement not as an end in itself, not as entertainment, nor as a means to show off or attain victory over others in a vain contest to win admiration, but as a careful and collaborative effort toward the emergence of the truth. Even when one side is entirely in the right, its truth will be seen better in view of its power to solve problems and resolve objections.

Another corollary is that there is a less-known sibling to the defect that Socrates so often exposed in people. He showed that you can think you know something when really you don't. The flip-side of this is also possible: you can think you don't know something when really you do. That is what happens when you are confronted with objections to a self-evident principle and you do not know how to answer them, and you come to believe there is no answer to them.

You can be too smart for your own good, like Zeno of Elea. Not too many people see the seriousness of the problem about the halfway points in a motion. It took Zeno to discover it. You have probably heard of his argument that you cannot reach the door, since to do so you would have to get through an infinity of half-way points between you and the door, and it is impossible to get through an infinity of things. The solution of that problem improves our understanding of motion in ways that are impossible without solving that problem. But Zeno himself could not solve his own problem, and took it to be a refutation of the existence of motion. He knew that motion existed the same way we all do, but he thought he didn't know it, just because he didn't see that his problem with motion was merely a problem.

The history of philosophy is full of people who are smarter than you or me, many of whom were smart enough to discover problems that most people would never notice, but not smart enough to see them as problems and to resolve them. Aristotle said it is easier to tie the knots than to untie them in a drama. We see this in many movies and TV shows, that it is easier to intrigue

us with the many tangles and mysteries the characters get wrapped up in than to offer a satisfying resolution of all those difficulties. The same goes for self-evident principles. A little education is a dangerous thing; we can sometimes find ourselves educated into the problems about a principle, but not back out of them again, which leaves us in a worse condition than when we began, thinking we do not know things that we actually do know. It is harder to get out of such difficulties than into them, and rarer to find teachers that are willing and able to help you out of the difficulties than into them. That is why my wise old teacher and colleague, Molly Gustin, when about to write something important and self-evident on the blackboard, used to say “You’d have to be *PRET*-ty educated not to see *this*.”

A third corollary of my thesis is that there are certain signs that attend the true principles, and among these perhaps the chief one is that even those who try to oppose the most fundamental of principles must necessarily use them. For example, those who deny that we can know things with certainty claim to know this with certainty. Or again, those who say there is no truth insist that this is true. Or those who deny the principle that says contradictions are impossible typically do so because they think they have found something that contradicts it, and thus attack it because they unwittingly accept it. Or those who think we should let the passions rule reason generally do so because they are persuaded by some kind of reason, showing that they think reason ought to decide whether or not it should rule. Or those who deny that Euclid’s fifth postulate is self-evident end up using it while trying to prove it. Or those who deny that we form abstract ideas use abstract ideas in order to attack them. One might say that despite all their conscious disagreement, the philosophers are always in unconscious agreement, at least when it comes to the most fundamental principles of philosophy.

A fourth corollary is that later philosophers are not necessarily more advanced philosophers. Locke, Berkeley, and Hume came after Aristotle and St. Thomas in historical order, and did make some advances beyond them. But in many things, they also fell behind them. They did not consider the writings of Aristotle and St. Thomas very carefully, did not often cite,

explain, and assess their principles and arguments, which is hard work for anyone, and not something one is inclined to do unless one is already a disciple of those thinkers. While that is understandable enough, it also means that Locke, Berkeley, and Hume had only begun to discover many problems to which Aristotle and St. Thomas knew the solutions, of which solutions these modern thinkers were simply unaware. The problem about general ideas is one example. Aristotle knew that a universal idea is not an image, which resolves the problems we encountered earlier. So the modern philosophers are further on in time than Aristotle, but behind him in the philosophy of universals.

And now a final corollary. The most necessary (but also one of the most difficult) things in all of philosophy, in the whole pursuit of wisdom, is to learn the principles well, and thus to make a good beginning. A good beginning is what we aim to provide here at this college. When we say this, we mean you don't walk out our doors numbering among the wise. Not yet, or not fully, not even to the extent that human beings can be called wise. But if you apply yourself here, you will come away not only wiser, but even with a beginning of wisdom—meaning you will possess the whole of wisdom in its nascent stage, as a seedling or sapling is the beginning of a magnificent tree. And just as a tree never stops drawing life from its roots, and the higher the tree, the deeper its roots must grow, so our growth in wisdom relies continuously on the first principles. We must constantly return to them and work to understand them better. More than any great book, they are inexhaustible.

