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Ideology and Aristotelian Philosophy

I think we can all agree that we are living in a strange time, one in which there resides a widely prevalent tendency both inside and outside of the university to view human aspirations and activity as a struggle between rival ideologies. A number of emotionally-laden examples come to mind. The attractiveness of socialism especially among youth; a universal right to healthcare; doomsday predictions resulting from global warming or climate change; sex or gender having no relation to biology; human nature and human acts having only temporary, utilitarian value; human nature, marriage, and family postulated as merely social constructs; meaning, if attached to any particular phenomena, seen as only subjective; and, religion being so violent that it must be kept safely away from politics. To get a basic understanding of ideology, I will sketch briefly its philosophical underpinning as conceived by its founder. Then I will compare ideology to an alternative way of philosophizing by examining Aristotle's philosophy which will include one of the most important philosophers in the Aristotelian tradition, St. Thomas Aquinas. In conclusion, I will determine what pedagogical benefits flow from such a comparison.

We owe the term "ideology" to Antoine-Louis-Claude, Comte Destutt de Tracy (1754 – 1836) a French philosopher, soldier, and chief *idéologue*, so called because of the philosophical school of *idéologie*, which he founded.¹ Imprisoned

1 See Antoine-Louis-Claude, Comte Destutt de Tracy, *Éléments d'idéologie*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Courcier, 1817; Reprint, Paris: Vrin, 1970), I, pp. 11-13 of Henri Gouhier's "Introduction historique."

as a nobleman during the Reign of Terror, he narrowly escaped being guillotined thanks to the downfall of Robespierre and went on to be involved in the reorganization of French public education under The Directory. This project attempted to change the world, to perfect society by shaping morality and social order, not on arbitrary experience or religious traditions, but on carefully thought-out human ideas. If ideas could be analyzed and men's motives and passions be unraveled, social relations could be arranged on the most exact knowledge of human nature to materially reflect real human aspirations, desires, and needs. Consequently, ideology would reconstruct politics, economics, and ethics from the ground up beginning with the simplest processes of sensations. A full-blown program of social engineering would remake the environment, thus altering our sensations and changing our ideas. Convinced he had found the truth, Tracy explained before the Class of Moral and Political Sciences of the French Institute in 1796: "It is above all in setting the moral sciences on a firm and stable basis that you will meet the expectations of an enlightened Europe....It is this motive which leads me to bring to your attention the science of the formation of ideas."²

Influenced by the work of John Locke who argued that the mind has no other immediate object than its ideas which come through the senses or are the product of sensations, Tracy accepted the sensism of Étienne Bonnot de Condillac (1715–80) who likewise maintained that human sensations are the basis of all knowledge. For Tracy, thinking consists of receiving impressions or modifications or ways of being of which we are aware. They can all be categorized under the heading of

2 Antoine-Louis-Claude, Comte Destutt de Tracy, "Mémoire sur la faculté de penser, lu le 2 floréal an IV (1796) à l'Institut," *Mémoires de l'Institut national des sciences et des arts, pour l'an IV de la République*, (Paris: Baudouin, 1798-1804) I, p. 285. "[P]our le fond des idées, j'avoue sincèrement que je crois être arrivé à la vérité, et qu'il ne me reste aucun louche ni aucun embarras dans l'esprit sur les questions que j'ai traitées. Mes réflexions postérieures, mes travaux subséquens et les conséquences que j'ai tirées des premières données, ont également confirmé mes opinions; et c'est avec une sécurité entière que je me crois assuré de la solidité des principes que j'ai établis après beaucoup d'hésitations et d'incertitudes "(Tracy, *Éléments d'idéologie*, "Avertissement de l'édition de 1804," I, pp. v-vi). Tracy's pedagogical preoccupations are evident throughout his writings.

ideas or perceptions and, since we feel them, they can also be called sensations or feelings. Tracy also emphasized the physiological nature of sensation. Since ideas were to be observed and analyzed and systematized like properties of a mineral, or plant, or animal, Tracy classified them as a part of zoology, an area within a more general science of the human animal.³ On this view, human thought is nothing but an elaboration of sensations, an activity of the nervous system. All thinking which is based on four principal realms of conscious behavior—sensibility or perception, memory, judgment, and will—employs various combinations of sensations.⁴ Tracy's fundamentally reductionist, materialistic naturalism approach in philosophy, pedagogy, and the other humanistic disciplines stood in direct opposition to the metaphysical, theological, and authoritarian approaches of his time. Because of its extreme dependence on the human senses for verification of knowledge, ideology was used as a weapon against not only religious doctrine but against secular authority as well. Politically, the movement was suppressed by Napoleon who dismissed ideology as being out of touch with reality and used the term pejoratively against his liberal foes who supported his coup d'état in 1799.⁵ Philosophically, Louis Gabriel Ambroise, viscount de Bonald (1754-1840) defined ideology as "a sterile study of thought working upon itself, never producing anything."⁶ Bonald criticized the entire undertaking of ideology as self-defeating to human thought.

The term "ideology" is notoriously difficult to pin down as a single, determi-

3 Tracy, *Éléments d'idéologie*, "Préface de l'édition de 1801," pp. xiii-xv.

4 Tracy, *Éléments d'idéologie*, pp. 21-73; Etienne Gilson; Thomas Langan; Armand A. Maurer, *Recent Philosophy: Hegel to the Present* (New York: Random House, 1966), pp. 177-80.

5 "It is to the doctrine of ideologies—to this diffuse metaphysics, which in a contrived manner seeks to find the primary causes and on this foundation would erect the legislation of peoples, instead of adapting the laws to a knowledge of the human heart and of the lessons of history—to which one must attribute all the misfortunes which have befallen our beloved France" (quoted by Arne Naess et al., *Democracy, Ideology and Objectivity* (Oslo: Oslo University Press, 1956), p. 131).

6 Pierre Larousse, *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle* (Paris: Administration du Grand dictionnaire universel, 1866-1877) 9: p. 549. For a discussion of Bonald, see Gilson, Langan, Maurer, *Recent Philosophy*, pp. 209-214.

nate concept. By a process of broadening from Napoleon's attack, the term came to denote a sense of abstract, impractical, or fanatical theory. In the 19th and 20th century, the term ideology shifted back and forth between positive and negative connotations. It has been applied loosely to systems as diverse as Tracy's own science of ideas, the positivism of Auguste Comte, communism and several other types of socialism, fascism, Nazism, Maoism, and certain kinds of nationalism. The current usage of the term ideology suggests that its importance is causal rather than cognitive. Ideology in this sense is meant to change attitudes rather than inform. In extreme cases, ideologies are completely devoid of, or have only minimal, cognitive content and are designed solely for manipulation to advance specific political and social agendas.⁷ For the purposes of this paper, "ideology" will be taken in the stricter sense that stays fairly close to Destutt de Tracy's original conception, "a science of ideas."

While the evolution of Tracy's ideology includes Locke and Condillac in the forefront, behind and supporting them stands the Cartesian revolution in epistemology which located the direct and immediate object of human cognition in the mind itself and its ideas. Using a systematic doubt to rid the mind of its trust in sense cognition, Descartes called the mind to focus attention on itself and its ideas instead of being focused on the sensible world. Although Descartes' revolution had been well established by the time of Tracy, Bonald in his criticism of ideology hardened back to an older conception of mind as the instrument rather than the object of human cognition and used a vivid and profound metaphor to make his point. Bonald considered ideology making the hammer itself an object to be pounded upon instead of a tool used for constructing something else.⁸ Closer to our own time, when comparing ideology and Aristotelian philosophy, Fr. Joseph Owens cited Bonald's metaphor as posing the fundamental question in such a comparison, namely, whether reality or human ideas come first, "whether the human mind in

7 Naess, *Democracy, Ideology, and Objectivity*, pp. 16-21, 144, 147.

8 "... labeur ingrat, et sans résultat possible, qui n'est autre chose que frapper sur le marteau" (Louis Gabriel Ambroise Bonald, *Recherches philosophiques, Œuvres*, 4th ed. (Brussels: Société Nationale, 1845), V, pp. 40-41).

some way provides the content of its ideas or whether it itself and its concepts have rather the role of instruments for directly knowing things external to itself.”⁹

Aristotle’s division of the sciences, which Aquinas generally adopted, was not the modern one based on a qualitative and quantitative procedure, but rather one based on the starting points in which the sciences originate. For Aristotle, there are two basic types of knowledge or science: those which originate or find their first principles in things independent of the mind as in theoretical science, or those whose starting points are a result of the activity of the mind’s engagement with things as in practical science and productive science.¹⁰

Aristotelian theoretical science investigates things, or what exists. This includes both nature and mental phenomena and mathematics and metaphysics. For Aristotle, human knowledge originates not in sensations as the ideologues maintain, but in sensible things, and human cognition—both perception and intellection—is always of something other than itself.¹¹ Using his metaphysical principles of matter and form Aristotle is able to explain how in knowing something, the knower becomes, and is identical with, a real sensible thing.¹² Aquinas’ refinement

9 Joseph Owens, “Ideology and Aquinas,” *Thomistic Papers I*, ed. Victor B. Brezik, C.S.B. (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1984), p. 138.

10 Joseph Owens, “Is Philosophy in Aristotle an Ideology?” *Ideology, Philosophy and Politics*, ed. Anthony Parel (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1983), pp. 163-178. For a thorough discussion of Aristotle’s conception of the sciences, see Joseph Owens, *Cognition: An Epistemological Inquiry* (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1992), pp. 293-316.

11 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Lambda 9, 1074b-36-36.

12 Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 3.8.431b-20-30. See Joseph Owens, “Aristotle—Cognition a Way of Being,” *Aristotle: The Collected Papers of Joseph Owens*, ed. John R. Catan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981) pp. 74-80. While Owens finds in Aristotle’s epistemology a number of issues not adequately addressed in the texts, “loose ends left dangling,” he concluded that “[t]ogether they provide globally an insight into human knowledge that would be difficult to match in any other philosophy....The philosophical principles they involve are unmatched in the explanation of our immediate awareness of the sensible world” (See Joseph Owens, “Aristotelian Soul as Cognitive of Sensibles, Intelligibles, and Self,” *The Collected Papers of Joseph Owens*, pp. 97-98).

in terms of a thing and its existence went further in explaining how one and the same thing can exist in the external world of things and also exist cognitively in the human mind.¹³ In all cases, concepts and sensations always serve as instruments for grasping things other than themselves. Moreover, only by first becoming other things cognitively is the human mind aware of its perceptions and intellections. This priority is metaphysical not temporal. The moment a knower knows a sensible thing he also is concomitantly aware of himself, his activity, and his concepts. And even though these concepts, in turn, can become the objects of reflexive cognitive acts, these mental objects also are other than the acts by which they are known.¹⁴ In other words, in the Aristotelian philosophical tradition, the real world of sensible things, not human ideas, is fundamental to all subsequent thinking and reasoning. The real world as present in the human knower is the basis for correct thinking. Ideas can be made the object of reflexive thought, but if set up as independent starting points, as they are in ideology, such starting points are detached from the real sensible things existent in the external world required for their control. Thus, there is little surprise that ideologies can be very unrealistic because of their being out of touch with reality.¹⁵ Unlike ideology, any positing of an idea or sensation as an intermediate object between itself and the really existing thing is impossible within the Aristotelian tradition.

Not only is there a fundamental difference between the ideologues and Aristotle regarding the direct object of human thought, the two also differ in how

13 Aquinas, *De Veritate*, II, 5, ad 15m; ed. Leonine, XXII, 64, pp. 421-424; Owens, "Ideology and Aquinas," pp. 139-140.

14 Owens, "Ideology and Aquinas," pp. 138-139.

15 Meta-ideology, the study of the structure, form, and manifestation of ideologies, "posits that ideology is a *coherent system of ideas*, relying upon a few basic assumptions about reality that may or may not have any factual basis, but are subjective choices that serve as the seeds from which further thought grows. According to this perspective, ideologies are neither right nor wrong, but only a relativistic intellectual strategy for categorizing the world. The positive and negative effects of ideology range from the vigor and fervor of true believers to ideological infallibility" ("Ideology," *New World Encyclopedia*, <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Ideology>, accessed 12 March 2019).

human thought relates to moral, social, and political action. As the various forms of ideology throughout the 19th and 20th centuries have made clear, its thought always is aimed at action, whereas for Aristotelians, thought, man's highest activity, is not undertaken for the sake of something else. It is meant for intellectual contemplation. It has no other end. We undertake political life and activity to make possible conditions needed for thinking, for contemplating truth.¹⁶ While Aristotle did not go beyond his philosophical premises and specify what the mind's highest object of thought was, Aquinas, did. By availing himself of Christian theology, he specified that object as the beatific vision of God. Everything else, all practical and contemplative activity, is undertaken to arrive at contemplating ultimate truth, a vision of the divine which is available to all and results in its possession since the knower and known are identical.¹⁷

In addition to theoretical knowledge which is supreme, both Aristotle and Aquinas acknowledge two other types of knowledge or science that result in activity outside of the mind: practical science, or the type of knowledge which governs human conduct, and productive science commonly referred to as the arts and crafts. Practical or moral philosophy has its source in lived, deliberate, human choice as guided by "right reason," i.e., reason in conformity with prudence or the habit developed by the lifelong experience of acting correctly in the constantly changing situations which arise in everyday life.¹⁸ For Aristotelians, the criterion

16 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X,7,1177a12-1178a8,1177b4-6; *Metaphysics*, A2,982a-30-b10. For a discussion of whether the distinction between the theoretical orientation of thought and the practical orientation of thought is adequate for distinguishing philosophy and ideology, see Frederick C. Copleston, "Philosophy and Ideology," *Ideology, Philosophy and Politics*, pp. 17-36.

17 Aquinas, *In Sent*, Prolog., q. 1, a.1, Solut; ed. Mandonnet, I, pp. 7-8; *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Bk.3, Chap. 25. For a discussion of Aquinas' situating man's ultimate end within the Aristotelian philosophical framework and the resulting issues he had to address within his existential metaphysics, see Joseph Owens, *Human Destiny: Some Problems for Catholic Philosophy* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1985), pp. 31-50.

18 Because of the doctrine of eternal cosmic successions Aristotle did not seem bothered by any charge of circularity. Prior to every generation was a preceding one to hand down correct moral habituation. Aquinas, with his theory of natural law, avoids circularity by

of moral goodness is not some rigid, fixed plan or preconceived idea, but rather individual judgments made in each instance by the morally good individual. From these judgments moral philosophy gathers its premises and from these premises it draws conclusions that correspond to them in nature.¹⁹ Because Aristotelian moral philosophy is grounded not in pre-established plans or ideas conceived independently of human decisions but in individual moral judgments, it is more strongly linked with action than ideology. Moreover, precisely because Aristotelians do not locate the origin, standard, and moral criterion of moral philosophy in preconceived ideas, there is no room for any ideology to override the prudent judgments of a good person.²⁰

Aristotelian productive knowledge or science is based on a fixed design or plan worked out in the human mind that governs the activity that takes place outside of the mind. The goal of such science is a work or product which is faithful to the maker's plan or design.²¹ On the surface, this type of knowledge seems to resemble closely and parallel the workings of ideology. But arts and crafts require that the plan or design be worked or molded into something serving as matter for it—for example, wood or stone for the design of the sculpture, canvas for the inspiration of the painting. Here the similarity with ideology breaks down since it is impossible to regard the free choice of human agents as matter in this way. Human free choice has no set plan to be worked out. In moral philosophy, the will is guided by reason and reason's conclusion is action which, because of changing circumstances, is always new and unique with each conclusion. Human moral action does not result in an identical, repetitive product such as the printing of

locating starting points that express basic goods embedded and implicit in human actions, certain undeniable truths about what we ought and ought not do. See Owens, *Cognition: An Epistemological Inquiry*, pp. 299-300 and Ralph McNerny, "Ethics," *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. Norman Kretzmzn & Elenore Stump (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 196-216.

19 Owens, "Ideology and Aquinas," p. 145; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1.2.1103a31-b25; 1,3,1094b14-22; 2,2,1104a1-10.

20 Owens, "Ideology and Aquinas," pp. 145-146.

21 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 6.1.1025b22-23

name cards from one basic template or design. Rather action is based on goodness as seen in the particular action envisaged. Although it is true that some arts involve much adaptation in working out the set plan (e.g., medical surgery, a goal in soccer), regardless of how flexible such plans might be, ideology does not have a blueprint or plan for social engineering, for molding human behavior in the way a plan operates in arts and crafts. If it did, such a plan for social reform or political education and reform would seem naïve, unrealistic. In brief, even though ideology and Aristotelian productive knowledge both strive to model an effect on a pattern already thought out in the human mind, there is only a remote parallelism between the two.²²

At this point, one might well raise the question: What does all this really mean in the concrete, in discussions inside or outside of the classroom? What, if any, are the benefits of understanding that because of radically different ways of philosophizing, ideology has no place within any of the three types of Aristotelian knowledge or science?

First of all, this general conclusion points out radical differences and key areas of disagreement. Because of their different philosophical starting points, ideas versus real things, differences in philosophizing will be great in metaphysics: for example, the difference between adopting an ontological approach to demonstrating the existence of God based on the idea of God (Descartes), or undertaking an approach grounded in explaining the existential actuality that sensible beings receive from something else (Aquinas). Nor will there be agreement in moral and political philosophy because one side bases practical reason on ideas whereas the other bases it on the freedom of the individual person. In these areas, differences run deep and passions can be very strong. Some like Fr. Owens have remained optimistic and think that much patience and good will along with sufficient areas of common objectives and interests can result in common ground being achieved without relinquishing genuine incompatibilities. There certainly is merit to such an optimistic and generous approach to reaching practical harmony by right

22 Owens, "Ideology and Aquinas," pp. 146-147.

reason, but such optimism may well be overly-optimistic and overly-generous.²³

On the positive side, both Aristotelians and ideologues share a common ground that allows for profitable discussion. Because the content of the ideological idea and the Aristotelian idea are the same, both sides can discuss man, society, family, nation, etc. Both consider the same things and draw conclusions from the same intelligible content. For the Aristotelians, the common nature of a thing which really exists in things has intentional existence in the knower, and reflexively the concept in the human mind can become the object of a new act of cognition. As such, it becomes an idea detached from its basis in reality and functions as an immediate object of human thought. This allows for both sides to draw identical conclusions in the natural, life, and social sciences, for example.

The comparison between ideology and Aristotelian philosophizing also provides a means for assessing various ideologies from a perspective outside of themselves. For example, if Professor Paul Ricoeur is correct in maintaining that the real is irreducibly ideological, it seems that one can never escape one's own ideology and arrive at an objective judgment in treating others. And if Michael Freeden is correct in stressing the impossibility of ideological-free moral concepts, this would eliminate any critique of ideology that proceeds on moral or ethical grounds since our sense of the moral and ethical is mediated by concepts that are already always ideological.²⁴

The comparison of ideology and Aristotelian philosophy also makes clear the real danger of ideology, of developing grand projects based on ideas and expecting reality to conform to them. One may try to disregard reality and use ideas for a role they were never meant to play, but reality always has the final say. Stalinism in Poland, for example, took on a powerful ideological facade as the legitimate heir to socialist dreams and values and, with the skillful manipulation of words, it attracted many intellectuals despite its horrors and oppressive and terrorist aspects.

23 Owens, *Human Destiny*, pp. 82-83; Robert J. Henle, review of *Human Destiny. The Modern Schoolman*, 65 (January, 1988), pp.143-45.

24 Robert Porter, *Ideology: Contemporary Social, Political and Cultural Theory* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006), pp. 131-133.

But even those who took the facade seriously and developed the art of seeing all events and facts positively through the lens of ideology sooner or later had to confront the doctrine with reality.²⁵

Since Aristotelian philosophy is based not on ideas but on a realism, teachers with an appreciation of such philosophy have an advantage in the classroom and can equip students to cope in a world rife with ideologues. Aristotelians can identify weaknesses in various moral and political ideologies by showing how they rest on a misunderstanding of the nature of ideas and, as a result, are not based in reality or solidly rooted in a proper understanding of the human being and society. Aristotelians also can strive for agreement with ideologues regarding conclusions in the natural, life, and social sciences and even, perhaps, in moral and political philosophy.²⁶ But the battle will be painstakingly difficult given the rigid, strident, dictatorial nature of many current ideologies seeking to transform society into a harmonious secular paradise—in other words, heaven on earth. It is not uncommon today to encounter ideologues who claim to have absolute creeds that supersede practical experience while rejecting societal norms, values, traditions, and folkways as obstructions in their quest for power. And many share a strong commitment to stamping out religion because it preaches that terrestrial paradise can only come from God at the end of time, not from us.

One cannot refute philosophies since each philosophy makes claims based on its stating points. But one can question starting points. That is why it is important to get clear on what they are at the outset of a discussion. At the age of 79, Etienne Gilson, the great philosopher and historian of philosophy, discussed the question “What do you want to philosophize about?” He reminded us to start with a real object and a real knowledge of that object: “Let your metaphysics always bear on the physical—‘physical’ in the sense that St. Thomas used it: ‘sensate reality’—and

25 Leszek Kolakowski, “Genocide and Ideology,” *My Correct Views on Everything*, ed. Zbigniew Janowski (South Bend, Ind. : St Augustine’s Press, 2010), pp. 112, 118.

26 Imelda Chlodna, *Edukacja amerykańska. Drogi i bezdroża* (American Education: On and off the Road (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2008).

see that it aims at being its highest elucidation.” I can think of no better advice.²⁷

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27 Etienne Gilson, “The Education of a Philosopher,” *Thee Quests in Philosophy*, ed. Armand Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2008), pp. 23-24.

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Summary

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Key words: ideology, philosophy, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Destutt de Tracy