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Discovering a Master Teacher¹

My third year of college, I had the good fortune to enroll in a survey course in ancient philosophy. The instructor was a Hungarian émigré, named Francis Kovach, a man endowed with a forceful personality and a discipline of mind that was a marvel to behold. He had a distinguished German education, having earned a doctorate in philosophy from Cologne, where he wrote a dissertation under the direction of Gerard Verbeke. His dissertation is arguably the definitive study of the aesthetics of St. Thomas Aquinas.

By the time I sat in Professor Kovach's classroom, I had already taken many hours of philosophy. As I mentioned above, I declared philosophy my major the summer before I entered my freshman year. At American universities, an undergraduate curriculum consists largely of general or basic courses. Much of the curriculum is remedial. However, the student gets to include some specificity by declaring a major, such as English, biology, history, business, modern languages, etc. Most students do not declare a major until the second semester their sophomore year. But I entered the university with a major preemptively declared. As a result, I hit the ground running.

I strategized to enroll in multiple philosophy courses every semester. By my junior year I had already amassed enough credits in philosophy to satisfy the requirements for a major. What I didn't appreciate, however, is that the quality of those courses was compromised by a narrowness of subject matter and perspective. Almost all my instructors theretofore approached the subject of philosophy from a presumptive Anglo-American point of view. I had studied a lot of Hume, Ayer, and Russell. Some of this instruction was spiced with more than a sprinkling of German philosophers too, especially Frege and Wittgenstein, both of whom had resided and taught in Britain.

The Anglo-American partisans taught their courses as though philosophy did not exist before David Hume. While some of them would have denied it if accused directly, they basically were indoctrinating students in positivism, the view that if anything is knowable it

¹ This is the second part of a memoir written by Prof. Curtis Hancock. The first part can be found in issue 31 of "Man in Culture", part 1. See: <http://www.czlowiewkulturze.pl/>

must be accessible to empirical scientific method. Since the classical questions of philosophy (Does God exist? How should human beings live? Is there life after death?) are not accessible to scientific method, such questions are unknowable. Human beings are wasting their time trying to answer such questions.

Philosophical content was taught as though the most important developments in philosophy mainly occurred after World War II. Most of the instruction was palpably ahistorical. To assist me in these courses, a friend lent me some books that aimed to assess comprehensively the problems of philosophy. I studied these books carefully. But once I studied with Kovach I realized that such books typify what happened to philosophy in the twentieth century. The Problems of Philosophy that these books examine are really the problems of modern philosophy, an observation that Ed Feser has made effectively in some of his books, such as *The Last Superstition*. Philosophical instruction today takes modern skepticism as axiomatic and simply ignores, quite arbitrarily, two-thousand years of philosophical experience.²

A corollary of this instruction is that philosophy is reduced to systematic logic. There is an anti-realism implicit in most modern philosophy. In other words, modern philosophers follow John Locke's conviction that the proper objects of knowledge are our own ideas, not real things. Since truth is not measured by correspondence with reality, truth must be defined differently. Modern thinkers alternatively define truth as coherence, not correspondence. In other words, truth is the logical arrangement and interrelation of ideas instead of agreement with mind-independent realities. On this view, philosophy becomes either development of logical systems or the deconstruction of logical systems. Either way the assumption that philosophy can only be a system of ideas is behind most of the analysis, construction, and deconstruction among modern thinkers.

The good news is that Francis Kovach showed me another path. His classes were a refreshing alternative to the predictable and stale analytic philosophy that had been standard fare in my other courses. Kovach was teaching philosophy from a perspective that took seriously, and did not ignore, the wisdom of the ancient Greeks. I was stunned by this new experience in the classroom and judged that my earlier professors had been disingenuous and biased in implying that modern thought is the default position for any student of philosophy.

² E. Feser, *The Last Superstition: A Refutation of the New Atheism* (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 2008); see especially chapter five "Descent of the Modernists," 166-228.

They had never explained that there had been two-thousand years in philosophy that antedated their prejudgments about philosophy's origin in the seventeenth century.

Suddenly, I was learning about the Presocratics, Plato, and Aristotle. In my reading of Plato, I discovered how Socrates was at war with the Sophists. I could not help but suspect that many of my educators had more in common with the Sophists than with Socrates. Francis Kovach's course planted in my mind the suspicion that much of modern thought is a kind of sophistry. As the years of study have rolled along, I am further convinced that my early assessment of modern thought as sophistical was correct. This thesis—the sophistical nature of modernism—has been a mainstay of many of my own publications.

Protagoras, the most famous of the sophists, asserted that man is the measure of all things. The human mind itself, or how it is constructed by human society, becomes the standard for truth. Modern thought was destined to become a kind of Neo-Protagoreanism, a point my friend Peter Redpath has made in his reflections on the history of philosophy. He argues that Neo-Protagoreanism follows upon the fact that modern thought is not really philosophy but ideosophy, a claim made famously by Jacques Maritain. Once modernists agree with Locke that the proper object of our knowledge is not things but our own ideas, modern thought will become ideosophy, a rummaging through ideas, not an examination of things. How can Neo-Protagoreanism not follow?

Francis Kovach was an earthquake in my philosophical formation. His influence was so strong that I began a serious study of ancient philosophy, including a desire to learn ancient Greek. Because Kovach's specialty was the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas, he introduced me to the works of Aristotle through the commentaries of St. Thomas on Aristotle's work. Anxious to understand the work of Aquinas better, I enrolled in Professor Kovach's course on medieval philosophy, which he taught the next semester.

It was not just Kovach's brilliance and encyclopedic knowledge but his willingness to assert truth-claims and try to defend them. He was confident that philosophy could find truth. Nor did he reduce truth to that which is measurable by empirical science, as my professors steeped in positivism had. He believed philosophy could access the great questions—God, freedom, and immortality—and answer them to the extent the humble limits of human understanding would allow. While acknowledging the limits of philosophy, he was nonetheless convinced that experience supported by reason could justify answers to real philosophical problems. This was the first time I was exposed to such a confident attitude

about philosophy. My other professors basically apologized for philosophy, so much so that I was left wondering about philosophy's value.

Kovach's personality manifested an electric intellectual power. He was very animated in the classroom. While short, he radiated vigor and strength. He wore Peabody glasses with thick lenses, which were disconcerting because he would come up to a student's desk and peer intently at him or her. He would pay students the intolerable compliment of taking their remarks and questions seriously. If he thought a student said something implausible, he would not hesitate to explain why it was so.

Francis did not suffer fools gladly. He regarded American students as spoiled brats, which sometimes led him to ignite polemical fireworks in the classroom, dramatic moments that nonetheless kept to the subject matter of the lecture and advanced the points he was trying to make. As a rule, he never crossed the threshold into rudeness, but he could be intimidating. Some students thought he was contentious, and a little volatile. I thought such students were marshmallows, and oversensitive. Today, we would call such students "snowflakes." I was more willing to accept his manner because I knew his background story. I knew that he had suffered much, having been taken prisoner as a laborer by the Nazis in the War. I also knew that the War had derailed his academic career. In 1944 he was admitted to the University of Münster for doctoral studies. But as that city was being bombed day and night, he chose not to attend. Shortly, thereafter he was shanghaied by the Germans. Already married, he lost a child in the war.

True, his personality could make one a little uncomfortable, but he had a good heart and I tried not to let his peccadillos distract from his marvelous intellectual aptitude and achievement. His linguistic gifts were astounding. His reading knowledge of Greek was competent, but he could read, speak, and write in an exquisite Latin. He spoke German like a native. He had skill in French and had mastered English in America. He had read literature in all the above languages. Not surprisingly, he would delight in speaking Hungarian in a timely context—to translate and make a philosophical or theological point.

In both style and substance Kovach was different from what I had witnessed before. His lectures were a clinic in syllogistic logic. But it was a logic in the service of the pursuit of real philosophical knowledge, not the parsing of logic for its own sake. There was always an overall point to his presentations, and he emphasized it in such a way that it was never lost on the students. He was a champion of *philosophia perennis*, the enduring questions of philosophy as answered by the cumulative wisdom of generations of thinkers originating with

ancient times. I also enjoyed that he was a polemicist. In his courses one would expect Francis to present in a methodical way the perpetual issues of the perennial philosophy. He would relish explaining how Scholastic Philosophers, the thinkers of the thirteenth century, cast a powerful light on questions and answers constitutive of genuine wisdom.

It was my good fortune that Francis Kovach and family immigrated to America, eventually finding their way to Oklahoma. He earned his degree from Cologne fifteen years after he turned down his Münster opportunity. After coming to America in the late forties, he acquired a teaching position at St. Scholastica in Duluth, Minnesota. As a Hungarian immigrant, it was understandable that he settled in Duluth. In that part of Minnesota, there is a large Finnish community, congenial for Hungarians who share the same language group as the Finns. He was grateful to have a job, but his English was still a project and he was burdened with a teaching load of twenty-two hours. He always scowled when St. Scholastica was mentioned, and he described his time there as “slave labor.” He must have been relieved to get a leave of absence from St. Scholastica for a year. He moved to Cologne and wrote his dissertation, at last earning his Ph.D.

Eventually, he would teach a couple of years at Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas and a couple of years at Villanova in Philadelphia. He arrived in Oklahoma in the late sixties, where he was awarded the endowed Skogsberg Chair of philosophy. The Chair was named after a wealthy Austrian family who immigrated to Oklahoma and became successful wheat farmers. Disturbed that there was little classical thought and no Catholic wisdom taught at the University of Oklahoma, Mrs. Skogsberg, after being widowed, endowed the chair handsomely to remedy these deficiencies. The Skogsberg family got their money’s worth with Kovach, who was the right selection for the distinguished chair. He took seriously the mission to bring Catholic wisdom to the people of Oklahoma, even with a kind of vengeance.

Kovach’s course was providential because he was bold enough to challenge the sophomoric atheism endemic among undergraduate students of philosophy. I needed such disabuse myself. For some time, I had fallen under the influence of Bertrand Russell and his minions who believed that a sophisticated person should be an atheist. One of my best friends, John Musgrove, who ran track and cross country with me, was enthralled with Ayn Rand. Her atheism influenced him and daily conversations with John influenced me. Yes, I fulfilled my mother’s prophecy and let philosophy (or what I thought passed for it) convert me to atheism. Kovach’s polemics awakened me from my atheistic complacency, making

atheism uncomfortable to my philosophical conscience. His influence, along with my excursus into reading existentialists, and along with edifying dialogues with friends like Joe Pappin, made atheism just an episode in my life rather than a defining characteristic.

Because Kovach helped me move beyond atheism, I've always credited him for my special interest as a philosopher on theism, defense of God's existence and nature. Because I had Kovach's guidance, I was able to first learn theism from Thomas Aquinas, a consummate metaphysician. I am grateful that my first study of theism was through the guidance of St. Thomas. Many theists are not conversant in metaphysics and, as a result, their theism lacks depth. It's common today for theists to rely on empirical science as their principal guide in argument. This is well and good, but it should complement, not substitute, for the deeper metaphysical grounds for theism. Kovach showed me that St. Thomas Aquinas understood theism as a metaphysical enterprise and not dependent on this or that scientific hypothesis du jour. The fashion today is to use the latest scientific theories to support theistic arguments. Intelligent design is emblematic of this defense of theism. Kovach would have dismissed intelligent design with the wave of his hand. St. Thomas understood that the soundest theism, grounded as it should be in metaphysics, does not stand or fall on this or that scientific theory. Speaking of the Ptolemaic astronomers, Aquinas remarked that "the suppositions that these astronomers have invented need not necessarily be true; for perhaps the phenomena of the stars are explicable on some other plan not yet discovered by men."³

Aquinas's insight is sadly lost on theists today, even distinguished ones. I heard William Lane Craig once remark that Aquinas's Five Ways (his five classical proofs for the existence of God) were obsolete because the Ptolemaic science which they presupposed has been tossed in the dustbin of scientific history. Craig obviously overlooked the passage I just quoted. Aquinas's theism does not rely on the findings of variable empirical science for its premises. His theism is immune to any and every change that may happen in scientific history and advancement. Because truth is a unity, any truth determined by science must be compatible with metaphysical truth. Truth will not conflict with truth. So, there is nothing that empirical science can put forward that can threaten or undermine St. Thomas's theism.

While there were some aspects of Kovach's teaching style that annoyed me, I've noticed a resemblance between his teaching style and my own. I will sometimes catch myself

³ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Scientia de caelo et mundo*. Translated by Fabian R. Larcher and Pierre H. Conway as *Exposition of Aristotle's Treatise On the Heavens*, in two volumes, College of Saint Mary of the Springs, 1964. II, 17.

teaching in a way that reminds me of Kovach. I accept this as a sign of his positive influence, since he was one of many fine teachers I've learned from.

Because I envisioned that I myself would one day be a professor, I paid close attention to excellent teachers and took elements out of their style and technique that I could adapt to my own teaching style and methods later. One thing I learned by observing good teachers is that they don't rely on gimmicks or fads. They demonstrate that the fundamental qualification for good college teaching is that the teacher knows his subject well. With a pedagogical vocation in mind, I once asked an accomplished teacher what advice she would give to a fledgling student who hopes one day to excel at the craft of teaching. She replied that there are two essentials: (1) know your subject, and (2) adapt a teaching style that is conversational with high energy. I've taken that advice to heart my entire professional life. Kovach certainly exemplified both of those essentials.

One of the things I also admired about Kovach was his integrity. He was one of the first people I knew who was immune to political correctness. I hadn't met anyone so indifferent to the climate of public opinion. I know that he sometimes paid a price for this. He gained a notoriety (or infamy in the minds of some) for being outspoken. But he was tolerated, as a rule. Today, his outspokenness would be positively anathema.