Preface

All my formal philosophical training was done within the tradition of analytic philosophy. But when I began teaching in a Great Books honors program thirty years ago, I was forced to read Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas in a way that I had never done before. The rationale for the program was that we could still learn much about freedom, justice, and a well-lived life from these ancient authors. But these sorts of "big questions" were not the sorts of questions I was taught to ask (much less try to answer) in graduate school.

The program also required that we read and teach *whole* books, not analyzing small fractions or individual arguments. That too was a new experience. When I was a student, it was standard fare to read the three pages of Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* that contained his "five ways" of proving the existence of God and then to evaluate soundness of these arguments. The fact that we had only read a tiny fraction of the *Summa* in which these arguments were found seemed beside the point. "After all," as good analytic philosophers we said, "arguments must stand on their own two feet—either their individual premises entail their conclusion or they don't."

The dynamics of twenty years of reading these philosophers with lower division students changed all that. Though students were initially enamored with the idea of reading the "Great Books," they soon began to baulk at the discipline this required. And when they read a sentence in Aquinas like, "The cause of the causality of the efficient cause is the final cause," the spirit of rebellion became palpable. And it was toward *me* that the rebellion was directed because now it was me who was *making* them read these "dead white males" who knew nothing of space travel, much less the internet! I learned much about "refuting" ancient philosophers in graduate school; making them intelligible and/or believable was something I had to learn on my own.

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More than any other book, it was Plato's *Republic* that taught me how to teach in Butte College's honors program. Though I must confess, at first I shared some of my students' skepticism. Plato's world was not our world. What could I possibly learn from a book that asked and answered *all* the "big questions" in ethics, political theory, epistemology, metaphysics, and the philosophy of mind in a mere 300 pages? All my previous training taught me to ask *little* questions. And it seemed like the smaller the question I addressed, the better my grade. If Plato had submitted his *Republic* as a dissertation, I mused, it never would have been accepted.

So though I began "by faith" believing that Plato had something important to teach us today, and in time I began to see that what he had to say about "curriculum selection" for future rulers (my students called it "censorship") had connections with what he had to say about the dialectical justification of epistemological assumptions. Soon other connections began to emerge. For example, in Plato's mind, it was impossible to think clearly about the virtues and vices of liberal democracies until questions in the metaphysics of "truth" had been asked and answered. Oh how my "analytic" self rebelled! It seemed that in Plato all philosophical questions were connected. However, in time, my conversion was complete. Even though colleagues might scoff, I now openly proclaimed that "big questions" could both be asked and answered, provide that they were approached *synthetically*.

Though parts of Plato's ideal republic still seem misguided, he fully convinced me that ideas always exist in an ecosystem. No philosophical idea, no matter how small, can live by itself. Ideas always gain their force, power, and life from their surrounding ideas. Nothing living in an ecosystem lives by itself.

The ecosystem of ideas in this book comes largely from Aristotle and his medieval interpreter, Aquinas. Aristotle, of course, was a pagan. He knew nothing about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Aquinas, on the other hand, was a devout Christian who never looked to philosophy for the ultimate truth. But this never caused him to disparage the penultimate truths that he discovered in Aristotle.

Yet, how can students growing up with the wonders of modern science *not* disparage both Aristotle and Aquinas? After all, both were firmly convinced that the earth was the center of the universe and that biological species were eternally fixed and immutable. Since they were

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so obviously wrong about these matters, why should we try to figure out what they had to say about other matters? Philosophy, as one of the characters in Plato's *Republic* says, is appropriate for youngsters, but when one grows up we should address adult questions in an adult fashion. Today, this pretty much means that as adults in college we should ask (1) "scientific" questions about how the universe works or (2) "economic" questions about how to make a lot of money. Like it or not, that's where my students are "at" so I always begin there, as does this book.

After a very quick summary of two fundamental principles of logic in the first chapter, the next two chapters discuss "the scientific method" as Newton and Darwin employed it. We conclude that *the* scientific method does not exist—the reasoning of Newton and Darwin was no different from the reasoning of ancient philosophers, modern lawyers, and skilled auto mechanics. Yes, college students should study the universe in a "scientific" way, but they should not assume the very narrow understanding of science perpetuated by the positivism of the previous century.

On the other hand, we must avoid a simple relativism that assumes that all ideas—both of philosophers and of scientists—are nothing more than a "social construct." My strategic response has been to flesh out the implications of three simple propositions: 1) plants and animals exist; 2) square circles and other contradictions do not exist; and 3) nothing comes from nothing. These common sense propositions have become my "sound bite" summary of Aristotelian philosophy. No matter how predisposed to relativism today's students are, the vast majority still accept these common sense propositions. While they may be bored, they see no reason to question their truthfulness, even after I inform them that modern philosophy began with René Descartes' rejection of all three propositions.

At this point, patience is required. The next three chapters sketch the philosophical implications of these fundamental propositions. Though their point may not be immediately evident, they lay the groundwork for a philosophical alternative to both positivism and relativism. It is called *Aristotelian realism*. And while examining metaphysical and epistemological assumptions can be tedious, it must be done—otherwise philosophy is reduced to "come let us rap together."

With chapter 7—What does it mean to be human?—we return to an intrinsically interesting question. I've been polling students now for

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many years, and the vast majority initially answer this question as would Plato or Descartes: to be a human being is to have an immaterial soul that controls the body during this life and escapes to a better life when the body dies. Scientific materialism may reign among the scientific and philosophical elite, but it does not with the students.

Dualism and materialism, however, are not the only options. Aristotle argued that soul is the form of the body. While the body is a necessary condition for being human, it is not a sufficient condition. Without an essentially immaterial intellect we would not be human. So the most serious challenge to the Aristotelian understanding of the soul still comes from modern science—why talk about immaterial souls when functional MRIs can literally picture, in real time, what's happening in the brain when a person prays, philosophizes, or fantasies about philandering? Such a question deserves an answer.

Chapter 8 most directly addresses my student's second assumption about the kind of questions adults ought to study: how to make money? Of course, the vast majority of students want to be moral and they care a great deal about "values." So making money is not their *only* goal. It is just that "values" are understood to be intrinsically *personal*—I have my values, and they have their values. So who am I (or Aristotle) to tell them what they should or should not value? And, in one sense, my students are right. I fly radio-controlled airplanes in my free time, but that's no reason for *them* to fly radio-controlled airplanes in their free time.

But no Aristotelian would suggest that they should. Rather, Aristotelians are like physicians who tell their patients to take vitamin D supplements to maintain their health. The assumption here is that everyone prefers a healthy to an unhealthy life. So too, Aristotelians tell their students to cultivate the virtues of courage, temperance, justice, and practical wisdom if they want to flourish as human beings and be all they were meant to be. In short, if you want to be happy, practice the classical virtue. But there is no *single* way to flourish as a human being. While some pursuits (like power and fame) are always inimical to long term happiness, Aristotelians are the first to encourage students to follow their individual interests and talents—whether it is motorcycles or music. It is just that these must be pursued in the right way, at the right times, and in the right manner.

Just as the vast majority of my students are Cartesian dualists with regard to the soul, they are also philosophical libertarians with regard to

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free will. They assume that true freedom means that no person or thing (including brain states) is *causing* them to act one way or the other. No matter what functional MRIs show, they believe humans' free will *proves* that somewhere deep down in the brain there are gaps in the causal chain. And it is in these gaps that our freedom is found.

Aristotelians tell a quite different story. Yes, humans have a free will, but, No, it does not reside in gaps in the causal sequence of events. The relation between our soul (free will) and our body/brain is the same relation that exists between the meaning of a word and the ink with which it is written. By itself, this makes little sense. But having sloughed their way through the earlier chapters, the basic idea is fairly clear: in-*form*-ation in our minds is real and powerful, but it is not a physical thing nor is it subject to the laws of physical causation. Though we must immediately add that in-*form*-ation does not *violate* the laws of physical causation. In-*form*-ation is ascientific, without being unscientific. (My hyphenating "information" is simply a way of reminding the reader of the fundamental Aristotelian distinction between form and shape—technically called hylomorphism—that is developed in chapters 4 through 6.)

With chapter 10, we leave Aristotle behind and pick up Aquinas. Though Aristotle is convinced that an Unmoved Mover (god) is philosophically required, the god of Aristotle bears only a faint resemblance to the God of Aquinas. For Aristotle, god is the ultimate final cause which moves everything else without itself moving; it is like a bowl of food which "moves" a hungry dog to come and eat without itself moving. For Aquinas, God is not only a final cause, but also the efficient cause (Creator) of all that exists.

In one sense, chapter ten is a defense of the third and fifth of Aquinas' "five ways" for proving the existence of God that I (somewhat contemptuously) mentioned earlier. However, in another sense, the argument here will bear little resemblance to the analytic approach I pursued in graduate school. The power and life of Aquinas' argument comes not from their logical entailments, but from their interconnection with everything in the preceding chapters. While the premises are not obviously true *considered by themselves*, they are nonetheless extremely plausible in light of the *whole* of the philosophy in which they are embedded. Here, more than any place else, the "ecology of ideas" becomes apparent.

And here, too, is the "robustness" of Aristotelian realism most evident. While I emphasize the interconnection of philosophical ideas,

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Aristotle was definitely *not* interested in creating a deductive system where each proposition logically followed from its premises. Such a "system" is like a chain: it is only as strong as its weakest link. "Systems" like this lack redundancy, and hence, they lack robustness. Aristotle's philosophy is more like a black widow's web—messy in some respect, yet so interwoven that it can withstand wounds to many of its strands.

The last two chapters are all about Aquinas and his Christian predecessor, Augustine. Chapter 11 asks a question Aristotle never asked—If a good and all-powerful God exists, why is there so much pain and suffering? For contemporary Christians, the most common response to the problem of evil is grounded in a libertarian conception of freedom. Among analytic Christian philosophers this is even truer. However, it is not the path taken by Augustine and Aquinas since neither of them was a libertarian with respect to free will. Augustine, for essentially theological reasons, argued that God's providential control of the *whole* of creation precludes the idea that humans are autonomous agents, or at least, they were not autonomous when they were doing good. "The good that I do," Augustine famously prayed, "is done by You in me." Aquinas would whole hearted agree.

And Aquinas had a second reason for rejecting a libertarian conception of freedom—it's the third of the three fundamental principles of Aristotelian realism, namely, nothing comes from nothing. Or, in more contemporary terms, mass/energy is always conserved; it can be neither created nor destroyed.

For both these reasons chapter 11 develops a privation theory of evil. Evil is a real "hole" in the created ordered; it hurts and causes much suffering. But evil is not something God either does or could create. So why are there are "holes" in creation? Simply put, there are "holes" because not even an infinite God can create a second "God." By definition, there can only be *one* Creator of all that is. So an infinite creation, without any "holes," would be perfect and complete unto itself—a second "God." But this is not possible. Though we must be clear, such a philosophical response to the problem of evil is *not* intended to provide "existential" comfort. For that, Augustine and Aquinas look to faith in Christ and the power of his resurrection.

The final chapter is all about faith and making sense of Augustine's prayer. As we said, it begins, "The good that I do is done by You in me." But it concludes, "The evil is my fault." How can that be? Is this not a "heads I

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win, tails you lose" proposition? The salvation for which Christians pray has always been understood to be a gift of grace—it is not something one earns or works for; rather it is an "unmerited favor" bestowed by God alone. While salvation comes by faith, faith itself is a gift from God. But, again, how can the "good" that we do come from God, while the "bad" is our fault? Before this can be believed, it must be understood. A person can *verbally* say "Procrastination lays lazily understand the seven." But nonsense sentences like this cannot be believed. The final chapter seeks to make *believable* Augustine's and Aquinas' understanding of grace.

Throughout this book I write as a kind of layman. I have taught for thirty years at a two-year public college in California, which means that I have been paid to *teach* philosophy to lower division students. While my job provides much leisure to read and write, unlike professional philosophers working at universities, there is no expectation to publish in professional journals. Instead, I write for my students. So to call myself an "academic philosopher" doing "original research" is a little misleading. I prefer to think of myself as a good journalist trying to interest a thoughtful audience in a story that has not yet been widely reported.

And like all good journalism, sources should be named. So my footnotes are fairly extensive, and perhaps even excessive. But these footnotes can easily be ignored without detracting from the story. I have also included summaries at the beginning of each chapter. In some ways these are redundant and can also be ignored. However, some readers may want to read through all the chapter summaries before reading the text itself. This book, after all, is all about the "big picture" and the interconnection of ideas. It is not a mystery novel, so having a sneak peep at how the story ends may make it easier to connect the intervening dots.

Being a book about the "big picture," one of my goals is to ensure that students do not lose slight of the forest because they are looking so intently at the trees. As Aquinas said in the prologue to his *Summa Theologica* (a book he said was addressed to "beginners") students have frequently "been hampered by what they have found written by other authors, partly on account of the multiplication of useless questions, articles, and arguments." Of course, I would be rich if I had the proverbial dime for each of my students who said *that* about Aquinas' *Summa*! So finding the proper balance between precision and lucidity is always tricky. This is especially the case with the terms "Aristotelian realism," "positivism," "relativism," and "idealism" that are used throughout

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the book. Though each of these generic terms are distinguishable into countless different species, for pedagogical purposes I have tried to resist the temptation to multiply distinctions.

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