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Aux origines du *Laval théologique et philosophique*

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AUX ORIGINES DU *LAVAL THÉOLOGIQUE ET PHILOSOPHIQUE*

Leslie ARMOUR

It is a great — if perilous — honour to be asked to write about the origins and the history of *Laval théologique et philosophique*. For the review has played a distinctive place in a long and continuing history, and it represents an intersection of tradition and creativity, of logic and culture, and of human aspirations and social needs which give it a significant shape.

That I should try to draw this picture may send a shudder down some spines. For one vision of theological and philosophical journals implies that there should not really be anything much to say about them. Neither their origins nor their histories ought to matter. Many people think they are — or ought to be — empty vessels, shaped by tides of thought which carry them forward. Writers write, editors circulate their produce to evaluators, and whatever happens to have merit appears in print independently of anyone's predilections. On this view, what lands on the editor's desk is a matter of chance, but what appears in print is not chance at all. For what appears in print is determined solely on merit. Of course this implies that the idea of merit in philosophy and theology is something clearly known to all men and women who practice our profession even if it is a closely guarded secret which outsiders are not allowed to share.

Still, *Laval théologique et philosophique* picks themes. It usually offers two issues in a year which centre around major themes, one in theology, one in philosophy, and one which is more nearly open. It may still be held that the editors are merely attentive listeners who catch the passing trends and see to it that special issues address them. But it is not just editors who shape journals. Why does one send one's paper to one review rather than another ? Every English speaker knows what will be acceptable to the editor of *Mind* and what will not. *Mind* has always reflected, from its inception in the last century, the developing fashions of British philosophy. One

recalls the days when it was said that there was more Ryle in *Mind* than mind in Ryle.

In fact, philosophical reviews, like philosophy itself, do not just happen. It is not easy, though, to say just what does happen. The origins of philosophy itself may well be shrouded in mystery. At any rate philosophy excites wonder — and not only from those who wonder why anyone should bother with such nonsense, whether they think it divine, devilish or only boring. Indeed there are those who think that philosophy should be left to the deity and others who think it is always left to the devil. But it certainly must have arisen from a sharp intrusion into the human consciousness, even if it was only the logical realization that for every x there must be a not-x, something which allowed even for the speculation that God might not exist. And theology, too, if one thinks of it as the systematic sifting and organizing of what can no longer simply be taken for granted, must have come from some intrusion, perhaps as Karl Jaspers thought from the great upheavals five centuries or so before Christ. In those years the world was shaken by Socratic questioning, the universalist shift of the prophet Isaiah, the theological reversal which Buddhism brought to bear on Hinduism, the speculations of Mahivira, and the rethinking of Confucius and Lao Tzu. Theology, too, at least in its systematic moods, has its roots in the possibility of negation and the consequent demand for re-affirmation.

But a philosophical and theological review is a special puzzle. Composed of fragments — bits of conversation which intrude into ongoing discourse whose roots are in very old problems — it is always a continuation and an interruption. One cannot speak of mind and matter, free will and determinism, truth and error without evoking the whole history of philosophy. Even if one does not invoke Plato and Aristotle, Descartes and Malebranche, Hegel and Marx by name one almost certainly evokes them. Perhaps their ghosts do not haunt every piece of philosophy, but the problems one discusses would almost always be unintelligible without the long process within which the issues have become defined. This must be even more true of theology which, as Newman said, only makes sense within a very long tradition. And it must be true, I suppose, whether one thinks of the natural theology which has often been indistinguishable from philosophy, of the systematic theology which balances doctrines and dogmas, or of the study of the texts — scriptures, writings of the fathers, proceedings of church councils — which form the central focus of Judeo-Christian and Islamic religion. One may think that there is a pastoral theology which is something different, but the delivery of the message shapes the message just as the nature of the message must shape its delivery. Here in Canada we remember Marshall McLuhan with puzzlement but also with affection.

Philosophy and theology are, of course, differently situated with respect to this continuity. Just because philosophy is bound to its past and depends on it for its intelligibility, there are constant attempts to break free, to get outside and look inside. Just because continuity is so essential to theology, there are constant concerns that its practitioners have broken free, marked out new ground on which the faith sits poorly, and left the guidance of tradition. But theology, like philosophy, lives in peril of becoming irrelevant. It is very easy for a philosopher, and so, I suppose, it may be for a

theologian, too, to become so involved while reading Pascal, Arnauld, Nicole and Martin de Barcos as to feel the force of old disputes and to lose one's sense of distance and to engage in the pursuit of issues long since dead.

What is especially interesting about *Laval théologique* is that this wrestling with continuity and change has always been evident and on the surface. One can find, today, articles which pursue the fine points about the philosophy of St. Thomas raised in its earliest issues, but one can find today, too, not just debates about but contributions to the attempts to break free of tradition or even of philosophy which have marked French philosophy in recent decades.

Philosophy and theology have lived together here — mostly in peace — in a way which has created an interesting balance. They were once almost indistinguishable from one another and perhaps they are coming closer again, but sometimes they live in a little tension. Such a relation has a history.

We celebrate in this issue the fiftieth anniversary of a philosophical and theological review, and we do so in a place where philosophy and theology have flourished for 340 years. Claude Pijard, once a pupil at La Flèche where Descartes had studied, taught the first philosophy course in Québec in 1635. The urge to write was there almost from the beginning and the first surviving philosophical manuscript was written by Martin Bouvard just over forty years later.[1] Bouvard, too, had been to La Flèche, and his manual of logic wrestles with problems which would be familiar to the editors of *Laval théologique et philosophique* today. He is constantly preoccupied with maintaining his footing in a past which uniquely provides us with concepts which generations have laboured to analyze and understand. And yet he had to integrate the ideas which experience opened to him and which offered what hope he had of freeing the human mind.

There were, indeed, lots of interesting manuals to choose from including that of Eustachius a Sancto Paulo which Descartes admired and which Bouvard may well have used as a model. Copying was expensive, but Bouvard employed a copyist, too. So why write one's own ?

Bouvard had to reckon with the ideas which were circulating in Paris — none of us can avoid that — but he was also writing at a moment when a new world seemed to demand a rethinking of all he knew. Indeed, recent work has shown just how strong was the urge to rethink everything and how the Jesuits of which he was one sometimes compared themselves to the first Christians. Bouvard did what philosophers and theologians in the west have so often done. He returned to St. Augustine, this time to Augustine's theory of signs which he could develop to do some of the work of the Cartesian ideas. Augustine was the most convenient of saints. Descartes brushed him aside, though perhaps he was biting his tongue — for his debt to Augustine seems likely enough. Anyhow, Descartes and Augustine sounded happily alike on certain key questions. It might have shocked Augustine, but Bouvard was

1. Séminaire de Québec, manuscript M-138, *Compendium sive epitome in quo praecipia partes totius logicae continentur.*

able to include a useful dose of rationalism along with some interesting instructions about how to make logic apply to experience through the mixture of natural and artificial signs. Bouvard was a teacher of philosophy but he managed to do a fair bit of theology as well, tucking into his logic manual, for instance, a neat but brief solution to the problems posed by the doctrine of transubstantiation.

One may, of course, ask what was going on : Just as a few people were a little surprised that the review we celebrate should be thought necessary, so over the centuries more than a few people have worried about why anyone should want to teach philosophy in a remote place inhabited by a few officials, some rather rough and ready traders, and a group of aboriginals who had not read Aristotle. Well, teaching is a very conservative activity, and one would certainly not have been able to imagine a college in 1635 which did not in some way or other approach philosophy. Nor could one imagine philosophy (or any serious thought) without some implied theology, as Bouvard's manual suggests. But why have a college at all ? Amusing theories have been put forth, the least charming of which is that it was supposed that the indigenous leaders would send their sons there ; the sons would become in effect hostages and thus protect the missionaries from harm. Something of the same theory is offered by the great American Ivy League universities of our own day who are quite welcoming to the sons of the rich and powerful. They know that the rich will want to support them if only in order to make sure that the diplomas of their sons and daughters do not become worthless wall-paper.

But this theory of the history of philosophy in Québec likely has no foundation. To begin with, no civilization was imaginable to the Church, especially a church which embodied the French mind, which did not include a college. And the Jesuits realized, in fact, what not everyone even in our time is able to see clearly, that the aboriginal peoples did have philosophical ideas even if they had never read Aristotle, and this was a special reason for rethinking philosophy. Many of these concerns were present in the founding of our review 290 years later. Indeed it has contained material on the aboriginal mind as well as a good deal of Aristotle.

Thus a philosophical review was a natural activity. C.D. Broad once remarked that philosophy was a poor oral sport. And so, if civilization and philosophy somehow go together, and if philosophy has a cutting edge which is always at a time and in a place, any civilized place ought to have a philosophical review. In quite a different sense if M. Derrida is to be believed, philosophy could hardly be itself without *writing*, however much writing in and of itself multiplies potential meaning and renders quite impossible a final resolution to philosophical disputes. If this is so, then the continuous conversation which a philosophical review implies is an essential. How could one then imagine a civilization without a philosophical review ?

But the story of philosophy in Québec has a few twists and turns. In my view they must be paid a little attention if one is to understand the creation of our review in 1945 and the special shape and function it has had.

A kind of rationalized scholasticism with a certain Cartesian spirit marked philosophy in Québec in the seventeenth century. Gradually the new elements came to

predominate until one finds in the manuscript of Jean-Baptiste Labrosse — long used as a basic text — ideas which carefully incorporate the thinking of Malebranche, and I rather think show a certain unspoken affection for Spinoza.[2] Rationalism and a rethinking of experience play central roles.

You may well ask why this should be so. The most general answer is probably still that, as a new society took shape, there were new demands which could only be met by rethinking and by making use of whatever ideas were at hand.

Many elements might be mentioned, but the most interesting to me is the communitarian turn which was given to certain Cartesian ideas. Many people think of Cartesianism as a rather individualistic philosophy centring on the *cogito* and teetering perilously, always on the edge of solipsism. The emergence of the individual was one of several strong themes in France, and Descartes could be used in a way which seemed natural despite his own remarks about ethics and generosity. For it might be argued that the basic existence of a community was never in doubt. Indeed, when their time came, the French could well afford a revolution because the basic community, the coming together of people which makes it possible to validate public institutions, was unquestionably there. The English said "the King is dead, long live the King" but a time would come when the French had no trouble imagining the continuity of the people in the absence of the king, even if they had to wait until after their revolution for M. Michelet to invent the relevant idea of a people.

But here in Québec it could not quite have been so. The French revolution made many Québecois shiver. A hundred and fifty years had produced different outlooks in France and New France. At the beginning in Québec, surrounded by unwelcoming and empty country, the situation was one in which human hostility had a continuing place and security was never easy to find. The aboriginal peoples quarrelled among themselves and the Jesuits found themselves defending some of them against others. The difficulties of conversion often left the missionaries hostile, too.

But the population did pull together. Father Labrosse ended his days after the British conquest hiding French soldiers, and he became a modest hero among people who did not always know he had been a philosopher. A charming story has it that the bells of his church were heard to ring by themselves after his death. Perhaps fewer people would have believed it had they known he was a philosopher.

Whatever one wants to say, though, the community was fragile and felt itself lonely and abandoned after the British conquest. A philosophical answer was that we ought to realize that we all form a natural community because we all share the innate ideas of which Descartes spoke and we all share the same natural reason.

The most celebrated Cartesian of all in Québec was Jacques Odelin who toward the end of the first third of the nineteenth century declared himself publicly a Cartesian and did battle in the front pages of newspapers with the disciples of Félicité de Lamennais who had taken control of the college at St. Hyacinthe, then probably the main intellectual centre of Québec life.

2. Séminaire de Québec, manuscript M-67, *Cursus Philosophicus*.

The battles which raged across the pages of popular newspapers[3] actually had at their roots the problem of community, but they were deeply theological. The Menaisiens who taught at St. Hyacinthe believed that communities arose over time out of collective experience, and indeed that religion was to be validated by appeal to the developing sentiments of the community. The Cartesians believed that the community was grounded in common ideas and universal reason. I dare not open the question of whether there is really a fundamental ambiguity in Cartesian discourse, but, to this day one may find in Québec life strands of populism which reflect the Menaisien outlook, and strands of universalist rationalism which reflect the long Cartesian heritage. The Cartesians by temperament may not know they are Cartesians, but they tend to be, if not federalists, then people with a still wider notion of human government, people who would like to see Québec in something logically if not literally like a European union. The populists tend to see their life within a special and particular culture, and the lines of debate have often been drawn between the two. The lines do not follow exactly the lines of political debate because, as I said, many of the people I think of as continuing Cartesians have a vision wider than that of Canadian federalism, and at least some of the people I think of as Menaisiens imagine, as did Lamennais himself, a whole human experience which might bring a splintered humanity together.

But what is interesting from our point of view is that both sides had an interest in the history of philosophy and the continuity of theology, in the continuity of community and in the problem with which I began : the integration of the past and the present. They saw the issues differently, valued the history of philosophy in different ways, even saw reason differently. Sometimes they shocked one another. Odelin suffered a religious crisis and seems to have lost his faith for a time. Indeed he was for a while suspended from his priestly duties. But he regained his faith upon reading Descartes. The Menaisiens thought his claims for the efficacy of Descartes close to blasphemy. But they could collaborate.

One of the earliest theological reviews — a journal which ran to philosophy as well, *Mélanges Religieux*, was edited by J.C. Prince, almost certainly the author of some of the anonymous printed attacks on Odelin. But it was he who published Odelin's most profound essays, pieces of philosophical theology which still bear reading today. Intellectual dispute meant neither personal hostility nor a desire to limit debate.

On the surface at least, things were to change. There would come a time in the 1890s when *Mélanges Religieux* would be reprinted without the articles by Odelin.

The aftermath of the French Revolution brought to Québec some rather conservative clergy. More importantly, perhaps, after the failure of the rebellions of 1837 and faced with the pressures which the unions of Upper and Lower Canada and the subsequent confederation created, there was a tendency for Québec intellectuals to

3. *L'Écho du pays* and *L'Ami du peuple, de l'ordre et des lois*. The debate ran through 1833 and 1834.

close ranks. They were already mainly involved with the church, for the church provided an education for people from many walks of life.

Long before the encyclicals which made Thomism a kind of official philosophy, Thomism came to Québec. Partly it provided a way for people to make common cause and to rethink the central problem : How does one do philosophy if one must somehow retain the past and yet be open to the future ?

The idea of a perennial philosophy, something which must grow and yet maintain a continuing essence, was attractive. Partly, too, Thomism contained deep strands of Aristotelian and neo-Platonist thought, and so one could stay within it and carry on one's debates. For western philosophy is largely compounded from these traditions and almost any position can be defended using conceptual devices from Platonist or Aristotelian thought. Thomism also left open one of the most interesting issues — the philosophy of history. In the end it was views of history and human nature which had separated the Cartesians and the Menaisiens. There did indeed develop a rich but also very varied Thomist tradition in Québec, one which began rather tentatively, reached a full swell in the early years of this century, and continues, for that matter, today. But it had interesting features which showed its social context in Québec. And despite popular mythology I shall argue that it never really buried its predecessors.

For much of the nineteenth century the most popular textbook was Jérome Demers' *Institutiones Philosophicae*, a work which championed enlightenment philosophy.[4] To an important extent it was a response to the demand from the practitioners of the liberal professions. It attacked Menaisienism but, apart from that, it was generally eclectic and, indeed, gave considerable attention to Locke, a figure closely associated with the English mind.

More interesting still, perhaps, there developed an interest in the history of philosophy. If one is a very strict Thomist, I suppose there really is no history of philosophy except in the sense that there is a true doctrine and many false doctrines, and the history of philosophy consists, except in one case, of the latter. But history in the sense of an ongoing development of philosophy might well be impossible.

I am fairly sure that there were rather few really strict Thomists in this sense in Québec. The classic standard text was Arthur Robert's *Histoire de Philosophie* which went through seemingly endless editions for decades after its first publication in 1912. And, there, what do we find ?

He insists that Descartes was always a good Christian. He goes on to explain to his readers how German idealism developed from Cartesianism, and then he remarks that "Despite all the exaggerations for or against, one can say that Hegel is the one who had the most synthetic and clearest understandings of philosophical problems."[5] What was Robert's own view ? Well, he wrote a little logic book that seems to me

4. Demers taught at the Séminaire de Québec. His book was published by Thomas Cary. For an account of it, see Yvan LAMONDE, *La philosophie et son enseignement au Québec*, Québec, Ville La Salle, Hurtubise, 1980, p. 95-96.

5. P. 293.

full of Cartesian notions about ideas.[6] What is more he survived, became the first dean of philosophy at Laval in 1935, and lived on until 1970.

Philosophy, he makes clear in his history, is an ongoing activity. One had better read the scholastics, but there is more to philosophy than that. It is this attitude — if not necessarily the belief that underlies it — which one sees in the creation of our review in 1945.

The moment is an interesting one. The year 1945 was the year of the end of a war. Western civilization might regain some of its equilibrium. Contact with Europe could be re-opened.

At the same time there was a world now re-opened to exploration and philosophers and theologians in Québec might well have thought that they had something to say. The theological and philosophical review was the natural vehicle ; for what would be required was a lot of catching up, a lot of interchange of ideas, a lot of tentative exploration of trends of thought. At the same time work had gone on in Québec on traditional questions in both disciplines.

I suppose there are not a few people who have thought of *Laval théologique et philosophique* as a Thomist review, and indeed some such journals exist. There is a review called *The Thomist*, though I leave it to others to decide how much these days the name means what one thinks. But if there is still a serious Thomist review it is quite legitimate. *Laval théologique et philosophique* was, however, never it.

It is true that the first words in the first issue are "St. Thomas". But there is an article on Bergson, two discussions of Marxism, and a critique of Nazism.

The two founding editors, Charles De Koninck and Alphonse-Marie Parent wrote for the first issue. De Koninck was to appear more than forty times in the succeeding twenty years while Mgr Parent appeared only three times. They were very different people, but they had a good deal in common. I think it is fair to say that they had two worries about Québec culture, and that both worries helped to structure the review. One was that it might not be well enough heard in the world to maintain itself and the other was that it might become isolated and inward looking.

It is well to remember that in 1945 Québec society was a rare specimen. Its educational, medical, and charitable institutions were mainly supported and directed by the Church, and therefore powerfully influenced by a common philosophical outlook. It was already clear that the demands of education and the demands for public health and welfare could not be met by the church alone, and that the indefinite use of the state as a resource for activities controlled by another institution could not prove politically viable — even though the use of the state to support theologically oriented education was established in many parts of the world. In the United States such support was anathema, and despite the language lines, American ideas continued to grow in popularity. As the role of the state grew worries about it grew, too. The moment was not one in history in which too much faith in states was likely. There were thus

6. *Leçons de Logique*, Québec, Action Sociale Catholique, 1914 and 1940.

important questions : Could the whole system of social institutions change while the common philosophical ground was maintained ? If not, how should one confront an inevitably more pluralistic society ? A philosophical and theological review had, therefore a major task — the critical illumination of the existing outlook and a constant re-examination of its alternatives. It was also necessary to establish the place of that outlook in a larger world.

Charles De Koninck was a Belgian of Flemish origin whose education had been partly American, but mainly European, whose original interest was in the philosophy of science, and who had already made a thorough study of the work of Sir Arthur Eddington before he came to Québec. He became deeply integrated into the Québec culture, and deeply involved in trying to cast light on the philosophy which informed it. But he was never uncritical.

The status of women in Québec concerned him and led to a lively controversy at the end of his life over the possibility of an acceptable mode of birth control. Theology was no alien discipline to him and he put much effort into replacing the beautiful little girl image of the Virgin Mary with what he took to be an old and powerful tradition which linked her to Sophia as wisdom, and implied a dignity and power which women ought to have.

His own work in the history of philosophy drove him constantly closer to Aristotle at least in the sense that he came to believe that the philosophical tradition he was involved with required a critical return to its roots.

Mgr Parent was a native Québecois who also studied in Belgium. Jaromír Daněk recalled that he never let the sacred and the profane get out of balance. Symbolically, he kept his breviary and Plutarch together on his desk.[7] But he had a passionate interest in the concrete affairs of the contemporary world, was deeply involved in the reform of education in Québec, and insisted always that ideas from outside were essential.

It is intriguing, of course, to notice how theology and philosophy were related. Theology came first in the title — and still does. That is not the alphabetical order, and so one must suppose the title was intended to make a point.

Yet Charles De Koninck could argue the fine points of the doctrine of the bodily assumption of the Virgin Mary, joust with more conservative souls in the Vatican over birth control and write about piety itself. Putting together his philosophy of science and his philosophy of religion is a task which some have found daunting, but the disciplinary boundaries left him unworried.

Mgr Parent crossed the lines with equal ease. In fact one might think that he was more a moral and social philosopher than a theologian. His article in the first issue of our review was about the knowledge of good and evil. As rector of the university, a dozen years after the founding of the review, he wrote in *Laval théologique et phi-*

7. Jaromír DANĚK, in *Recueil commémoratif dédié à Alphonse-Marie Parent*, Presses de l'Université Laval, 1982, p. XV-XVI, cited by Henri-Paul Cunningham in *Coup d'œil sur l'histoire de la Faculté de philosophie*, Université Laval, 1985, p. 19.

losophique about the "new era" in Québec. He constantly worried about the fragmentation of disciplines and the danger that the university might just became an aggregation of trade-oriented activities.

Of course, one may say Thomist philosophy and Thomist theology can hardly be separated and, indeed, much ink has been spilled in an effort to decide whether St. Thomas was a philosopher or a theologian. But as I have said, the review never was a simple doctrinaire Thomist journal. I suppose one would have to look to 1974 to find the most Thomistic single issue, but that was an issue devoted to the seventh centenary of the death of St. Thomas.

It was not, of course, dedicated to the death of Thomistic ideas, and it contains much serious scholarship which is still relevant. The study of St. Thomas continues and, if its relative place in the scheme of things has somewhat diminished, it has reached new levels of sophistication in the last quarter-century. But the special issue of 1974 did contain some surprises. One of the most interesting articles is by Jean Richard who, indeed, is still with us and active in the affairs of the review. It addresses one of the great questions — analogy and symbolism in the philosophy of St. Thomas. It turns out to be about St. Thomas all right, but also about Karl Barth, about Paul Tillich and about Bernard Lonergan. Words like *herméneutique* figure in it. I mention it because it was one of the things which came to mind when I was helping a doctoral candidate plan a thesis about the use of reason in Karl Barth, and it illustrates exactly the ability to draw light from a variety of traditions which has so often characterised *Laval théologique et philosophique.*

It is true, certainly, that theology has over the years taken on emphases which are different from those of the Catholic tradition of 1945. There is more emphasis on textual interpretations of a kind which brings Protestants and Catholics closer together, more concern with the pastoral life, perhaps more concern with the spiritual life as something different from the philosophical life of contemplation. There is less concern now over the maintenance of orthodoxy.

But despite many attempts to separate the disciplines, philosophers have not yet been able to disentangle themselves from talk about God. Indeed, what Dominique Janicaud has called "le tournant théologique" in French philosophy is very much with us. On the other side, theologians are not at all reluctant to talk about Hegel and surely the practice of hermeneutic analysis has brought the two groups closer together.

Is it becoming more difficult to perform the tasks of which I first spoke ? Certainly the idea of a perennial philosophy is less talked about, but Aristotle continues to stalk our pages and has not become irrelevant. Nor has St. Thomas. And, like the young Martin Bouvard 320 years ago and most of the authors in the first issues of fifty years ago, we turn an ear to Paris now and then.