

## The Plain Person and the Catholicity of Philosophy

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In 1981 Alasdair MacIntyre published his famous work *After Virtue*.<sup>58</sup> This work opens with an invitation to imagine a catastrophe suffered by the natural sciences, a catastrophe in which laboratories are destroyed, physicists are lynched, libraries are burned, and the teaching of science is abolished. Some generations later, certain individuals attempt to revive science, but they have largely forgotten it. They recover the vocabulary of the sciences from the manuscripts they discover, and they use these rediscovered terms in reinstituted practices bearing the names 'physics,' 'chemistry,' 'biology,' and so on. But these persons do not fully understand the original meaning of the scientific terms they have rediscovered. They have only a "very partial knowledge" of the original meaning of each term. The underlying conceptual system in which these terms had their original context is entirely lost to this later generation. That however, is not the strangest aspect of the picture MacIntyre paints. What is disconcerting about this imaginary scenario is that these persons think that they are doing what scientists prior to the catastrophe did. They are oblivious to what they do not know. They are like children who are playing hospital, but, whereas children know that they are only *playing* hospital, these persons believe that their play is the real thing.

What is MacIntyre's purpose in laying out this imaginary world? He explains:

The hypothesis which I wish to advance is that in the actual world which we inhabit the language of morality is in the same state of grave disorder

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<sup>58</sup> *After Virtue*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981.

as the language of natural science in the imaginary world which I described.<sup>59</sup>

The problem that MacIntyre describes is not limited to that subcategory within philosophy called ethics. How could it be? Ethics is intimately related to our philosophical conceptions of human nature, teleology, epistemology and metaphysics. Hence the problem that MacIntyre points to in *After Virtue* is a disorder within contemporary philosophical practice, especially as it is ordinarily conceived and practiced in the university.

Today we find widespread and even severe disagreement among philosophers concerning the answers to most philosophical questions. Regarding this, MacIntyre writes,

"On most of the major issues that contemporary academic philosophers address – and it makes little difference whether their philosophical teachers were Wittgenstein, Quine, and Davidson or Husserl, Heidegger, and Derrida – there are currently two or more rival and competing views, giving expression to disagreements that run deep. There appears in almost all such cases to be no signs of any future resolution of such disagreements. Each contending party advances its own arguments, presents its own understanding of the relevant concepts, and responds to criticisms and objections in ways that satisfy its standards, but without

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, p. 2.

providing those who disagree with anything like what they would take to be a sufficient reason for withdrawing from their own position."<sup>60</sup>

In many if not most cases the disagreements appear chronically irresolvable, without even an imaginable path toward resolution. These disagreements among philosophers have also contributed to the general disregard for the discipline of philosophy as a truth-discovering practice, both by those in other areas of academia and in the general public. This has also led to the marginalization of philosophy as an integrating science in the university and in society, and its *de facto* replacement by physics, biochemistry, neurophysiology, psychology and other similar sciences.<sup>61</sup> The chronic and irresolvable character of these disagreements has contributed over time to a shift in the conception of philosophy, even the self-conception of philosophy by philosophers, from a truth-discovering practice to an activity or set of activities unified by a much less clearly defined nature and end.

Concerning the difference between philosophy as a truth-discovering practice, and the contemporary conception of philosophy, Hilaire Belloc writes:

"We have used in this connection the word "discovery," in connection with philosophy. It needs a line of explanation; for the modern world has

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<sup>60</sup> *God, Philosophy, Universities*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009.

<sup>61</sup> In his 1998 encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, Pope John Paul II referred to this marginalization of philosophy, writing, "It should also be borne in mind that the role of philosophy itself has changed in modern culture. From universal wisdom and learning, it has been gradually reduced to one of the many fields of human knowing; indeed in some ways it has been consigned to a wholly marginal role. Other forms of rationality have acquired an ever higher profile, making philosophical learning appear all the more peripheral. These forms of rationality are directed not towards the contemplation of truth and the search for the ultimate goal and meaning of life; but instead, as "instrumental reason", they are directed—actually or potentially—towards the promotion of utilitarian ends, towards enjoyment or power." (John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 47).

come to use the term "philosophy" to mean something very different from its true meaning. Philosophy signifies primarily the love of knowledge – ultimate knowledge upon the ultimate realities; and, by extension, it especially signifies the solving of questions which the mind puts to itself relative to the most important subjects with which the mind can deal. Thus this word "discovery" is especially applicable to the philosophic function – the action of the mind when it succeeds in philosophical research. ... It is the discovery of a new piece of reality; the establishment of a new certitude in the place of guesswork. ... Now because many of these questions have seemed at first sight insoluble, there has arisen, from the beginnings of the philosophic discussion, a sort of imitation of philosophy which the later Greeks called "sophistry," and of which it is a fair definition to say that it is the art of making up systems which do not really solve problems and which are hardly intended to do so by their authors; which are, in a word, not discoveries, but merely guesses at the best, or at the worst a mass of verbiage. This kind of stuff, which antiquity early learned to separate from true philosophy (which is the search for reality and the definition of it when discovered) has flourished prodigiously ... from the end of the 18th Century to the latter part of the 19th; and to it most modern educated men ... still give the term philosophy today."<sup>62</sup>

In this respect, we might revise MacIntyre's imaginary scenario, and ask ourselves the following question: If the practice of philosophy had at some point in recent history been

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<sup>62</sup> McNabb, Vincent. *The Catholic Church and Philosophy*. New York: MacMillan, 1927, p. ix.

replaced by sophistry, how would we know? What would be different? But I do not intend to answer that question here. Instead I want to focus on why philosophy cannot simply rest with widespread internal disagreements, and address the problem that underlies these seemingly irresolvable disagreements. In this paper I draw from MacIntyre's account of the plain person, and from a consideration of the implications of the catholicity of philosophy to present a means by which to overcome the seeming incommensurability of chronically irresolvable philosophical disagreements.

### The Catholicity of Philosophy

Philosophy as a social practice distinct from sophistry not only seeks truth; it seeks agreement concerning the truth. The pursuit of agreement is itself part of the philosophical pursuit of truth. Of course charity bids us share what we have discovered. But the pursuit of agreement is intrinsic to the practice of philosophy. That is partly because our pursuit of philosophical truth is a social pursuit, not merely an individual pursuit. But the essential social dimension of the practice of philosophy is itself rooted in the very nature of what it is that the practice of philosophy pursues. Philosophy as a practice pursues the truths about the reality we share with each other, that is, the world in which we all live. The very nature of philosophy is to seek out truths about the big questions, not so much questions about particular times, particular places, particular causes, particular beings or particular persons, but truths about the nature and origin and end of time, causality, being, purpose, and person. MacIntyre points this out when he writes,

"What is philosophical knowledge knowledge of? It is knowledge of Truth, the truth concerning "all that exists" and the complex relationships between the myriad of particular facts that comprise the universe."<sup>63</sup>

"Human beings in every culture pose fundamental existential questions about the order of things, about their own nature, and about their place in the order of things. Every religion advances its own answers to those questions, such questions as "Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil? What is there after this life?"<sup>64</sup>

The universality of these questions entails that philosophy cannot rest in the merely provincial, the ephemeral or the merely individual or subjective. The very nature of philosophical questions entails that philosophy as a practice must ever seek to be universal. We can refer to this universality as the *catholicity* intrinsic to the practice of philosophy. The philosopher as such seeks answers to questions that are not limited only to him or to her, in his or her time or place or culture, but are the universal and perennial questions asked by human persons of all times, places, languages and cultures. That is why catholicity is intrinsic to philosophy; anything lacking catholicity is something less than philosophy, at least in philosophy's fullest and most mature expression.

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<sup>63</sup> *God, Philosophy, Universities*, p. 145.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, p. 165. In the last part of this excerpt, MacIntyre is quoting from the opening paragraph of *Fides et Ratio*, which reads: " Moreover, a cursory glance at ancient history shows clearly how in different parts of the world, with their different cultures, there arise at the same time the fundamental questions which pervade human life: *Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil? What is there after this life?* These are the questions which we find in the sacred writings of Israel, as also in the Veda and the Avesta; we find them in the writings of Confucius and Lao-Tze, and in the preaching of Tirthankara and Buddha; they appear in the poetry of Homer and in the tragedies of Euripides and Sophocles, as they do in the philosophical writings of Plato and Aristotle. They are questions which have their common source in the quest for meaning which has always compelled the human heart."

This does not imply that we must begin our philosophical pursuit by first divesting ourselves of all our particularity or historical rootedness. On the contrary, argues MacIntyre, what we in all our particularity, our time, our place, our culture, our religion, our memories, our tradition, our concrete historical perspective, bring to the pursuit of philosophical truths is essential to the very success of that pursuit, because the particularity we bring with us to this inquiry is that through which and in which we find the universal answers to our philosophical questions.

Precisely because of philosophy's intrinsic catholicity, philosophers by the very nature of their practice seek agreement with other philosophers concerning the truths of philosophy. To refuse to seek agreement with other philosophers, or to rest content with seemingly irresolvable disagreements would be to deny the catholicity of philosophy. It would do so either by begging off philosophical questions altogether, or by performatively denying that there are any true answers to philosophical questions, or at least that those true answers are discoverable by us.

Hence philosophers as such cannot rest content with the present state of discord and disagreement within philosophy, but must pursue agreement. Yet merely plucking up our intellectual courage is not enough to overcome the chronic disagreement. We need to consider the underlying reasons for our internal disagreements, the fundamental points of disagreement explaining why the present disagreements seem irresolvable. This is one of

the tasks MacIntyre has taken up over the last thirty years. This is what has brought him to write about first principles and plain persons.<sup>65</sup>

### The Plain Person as the Material Ground for the Catholicity of Philosophy

The catholicity of philosophy entails that its true answers be the answers to every human person's deepest questions about reality. But to reach such answers we must reason in a universal or catholic way. That is, the reasoning by which philosophy reaches these answers must be accessible, in principle, to every human person, and thus must begin with premises that are shared either explicitly or implicitly. Without shared premises, our arguments would beg the question from the point of view of those who do not share our premises. Hence we must find common ground, a universal common ground from which to reach conclusions accessible in principle to every human person.

Where do we find this common ground? We find it in what MacIntyre refers to as the plain person. He has referred to the plain person in multiple places, but here consider one example. In discussing the 1998 encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, MacIntyre writes:

"The questions that philosophers ask are, the encyclical declares, questions that they first ask, not qua philosopher, but qua human being, qua plain person. They are the same questions as those asked by other plain persons and every plain person is potentially a philosopher. By asking those questions rigorously and systematically philosophers therefore, we may

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<sup>65</sup> See, for example, his article titled "Plain Persons and Moral Philosophy: Rules, Virtues and Goods," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. LXVI, No. 1., 3-19. See also "First Principles, Final Ends, Contemporary Issues," in *The Tasks of Philosophy: Selected Essays*, Vol. 1, 143-178.



infer, are to practice their trade, their craft, on behalf of all plain persons. They contribute to the common good by so doing, just as other plain persons, say carpenters or farmers, do. So philosophers owe it to other members of their community to speak and write in such a way that, so far as possible, what they say is accessible to those who are not academic philosophers. The philosopher shares with the plain non-philosophical or pre-philosophical person the need for and the search for truth: for the truths of everyday life, for the truths to be discovered by scientific research, for the truth about human goods and about the final human good."<sup>66</sup>

MacIntyre points out that the philosopher pursues the answers to philosophical questions not first as philosopher, but first as human being. The initial starting point of every philosophical inquiry is the common sense of the plain person, which MacIntyre also describes here as the pre-philosophical person. Catholicity could not be intrinsic to philosophy unless there were a shared common ground from which we reason. This shared common ground is also the shared resource by which seemingly irresolvable philosophical disagreements may in principle be resolved. The shared common ground is not only a shared capacity for reasoning, but also a shared body of knowledge acquired in the pre-philosophical period of every human life.

Regarding this relation of pre-philosophical knowledge to philosophy, Vincent McNabb writes,

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<sup>66</sup> *God, Philosophy, Universities*, pp. 166-167.

"We shall therefore define philosophy as *organised and supreme common sense*. By *common sense* we mean two things.; both [understood by] the people. First we mean "good sense," i.e. the plain view and certitude of the plain man-in-the-street. If any of the readers of this book do not know what this "good sense" is, they are plainly disqualified from reading further into its pages. Indeed they seem to qualify instead of psychological or medical treatment. Secondly, by *common sense* we also mean "common consent." Thank heavens, the majority of mankind (i.e. "the poor," as Lacordaire used to say) who have daily less and less material goods, still hold the bulk of the world's sound good sense. ... When we have defined philosophy as organised, supreme common sense, we have not discredited but have further accredited common sense. If the few who think, or who think they think, find themselves in opposition to the man on plain matters of fact, it is not the many, but the few who must mend their thinking. Philosophy's first duty is to justify mankind's intuitions. In other words, the philosopher is not the advocate of the devil, but the guardian of the poor."<sup>67</sup>

This conception of the relation between the knowledge had by the plain person, and philosophy, is not widely held today. But it is very much in keeping with MacIntyre's understanding of the philosopher's relation to, even duty to, the plain person.

One objection to the claim that the common human experience of the plain person

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<sup>67</sup> McNabb, Vincent. *The Catholic Church and Philosophy*. New York: MacMillan, 1927. pp. 3, 5-6.

is that common ground by which seemingly irresolvable philosophical disputes may be resolved, is that if there were such a common body of knowledge, the chronic and seemingly irresolvable philosophical disputes that have characterized the contemporary practice of philosophy would have been resolved. In short, the objection is that such a hypothesis oversimplifies, and is too facile. According to MacIntyre, the objection itself oversimplifies the situation, because it overlooks the possible ways in which persons can diverge from the body of knowledge possessed by the plain person, as I shall now explain.

### The Plain Person and Resolution of the Unresolvable

We know that to avoid begging the question, the premises of our arguments must at least be plausible to our interlocutors. That is because in order to reason together, we need to have common ground from which to reason. Rational mutual comparison of differing philosophical claims requires shared recognition of standards by which these claims and positions are weighed against each other. The presence of seemingly irresolvable disagreements among contemporary philosophers calls into question both the catholicity of philosophy and the availability of common ground by which to resolve these disagreements. Let's consider the various contexts in which philosophical disagreements occur.

In his book *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, MacIntyre lays out four different theoretical contexts in which justification of an ethical or philosophical claim can be made. The first is that of the "genuinely uninstructed plain person." The second is that of the person who understands and shares a virtue-theoretical philosophical scheme

that provides an explanatory framework for the ethical principles already operative within the moral practice of plain persons.<sup>68</sup> The third type of context for philosophical justification, according to MacIntyre, is characterized by a "large degree of incommensurability." Debate at this third level can take place only by comparing comprehensive standpoints or paradigms.<sup>69</sup> Concerning this third type MacIntyre claims that "A mistake of much nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Thomism was to suppose that the task of rational justification against their Cartesian, Humean, or Kantian adversaries was of the second rather than of this third type."<sup>70</sup> In other words, nineteenth and twentieth century Thomists mistakenly assumed that Cartesians and Humeans and Kantians shared the same broader explanatory framework. This mistake resulted in a disconnect, and a seeming irrelevance of the Thomistic arguments. But the Nietzschean

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<sup>68</sup> "[Q]uestions of rational justification may arise at four different levels. There is first of all that of the genuinely uninstructed plain person, posing the question "What is my good?" in a number of particularized ways, whose teacher has to assist him or her in the actualization of those potentialities which will carry such persons from their initial bare moral apprehensions to a discovery of the place of those apprehensions in a larger scheme. There is secondly the person who shares that larger scheme and is already able to articulate it in the Aristotelian terms which are its most adequate expression, so that demands for rational justification are framed in terms of a shared understanding of natural enquiry and a shared conception of first principles, even if what is at issue is on occasion their precise formulation. It was from within this kind of agreement that Aquinas conducted his debate with some rival Islamic, Jewish, and Latin Averroist positions. Such debate is necessarily very different from that between antagonists each of whom systematically rejects to some significant degree the other's first principles and conception of rational enquiry." (*Three Rival Versions*, pp. 145-146)

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, p. 146. MacIntyre writes: "It is ... the claim to provide a standpoint which suffers from less incoherence, is more comprehensive and more resourceful, but especially resourceful in one particular way. For among those resources, so it is claimed, is an ability not only to identify as limitations, defects, and errors of the opposing view what are or ought to be taken to be limitations, defects, and errors in the light of the standards of the opposing view itself, but also to explain in precise and detailed terms what it is about the opposing view which engenders just these particular limitations, defects, and errors and also what it is about that view which must deprive it of the resources required for understanding, overcoming and correcting them. And at the same time it will be claimed that what is cogent, insightful, and true in that opposing view can be incorporated within one's own view, providing on occasion needed corrections of that view."

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, p. 146.

opponents were not even at this third level in relation to the Thomists. MacIntyre claims that the Nietzscheans represent a fourth, and most removed level of rational justification viz-a-viz Thomism. Of this he writes:

"Yet against Nietzschean opponents it would not be enough to recognize this error. For it may well be the case, and it is in large part to Nietzsche himself that we are indebted for our understanding of this, that a philosophical or theological position may be so organized, both in its intellectual structures and in its institutionalized modes of presentation and enquiry that conversation with an opposing position may reveal that its adherents are systematically unable to recognize in it even those errors, defects, and limitations which ought to be recognized as such in the light of their own and its standards. When such a situation is encountered ... then yet another task of a fourth kind is added to the work of rational justification. What has to be supplied is a cogent theoretical explanation of ideological blindness[.]"<sup>71</sup>

This fourth level differs from the third in the following respect: with the third the disagreeing parties can at least compare their overall explanatory systems against each other. There is a shared implicit rationality by which they both can evaluate their respective paradigms, by means of shared criteria that not only explain the shared data but also explain why the other paradigm or theory fails to explain the data sufficiently. But at the fourth level, there is no present shared criteria showing the superiority of the

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 146-147.

one and the inferiority of the other. This is a case of *prima facie* incommensurability. MacIntyre proposes that in such a case, instead of pointing to a shared standard by which to compare paradigms, we have to explain why those holding the opposing position are blind.

How is this to be done? Again, given the catholicity of philosophy, this explanation of blindness cannot be question-begging. It must be an account capable of being seen and understood by those whom we believe to be blind in some respect. In a passing phrase elsewhere discussing Aquinas on natural law, MacIntyre gives us an important clue as to how this may be done. He writes:

"Aquinas ... is speaking of a knowledge of the natural law which human beings have by nature and that, since we are all human beings after all, we can surely all judge equally of what he says, plain persons and philosophers or theologians alike. Consider then Aquinas's portrait of the plain person in relation to the precepts of the natural law. The plain person initially, *as plain child*, exhibits his or her knowledge of the principium of the natural law; which is the principium of practical reasoning, in the same way that he or she exhibits his or her knowledge of the principle of non-contradiction, that is to say, not in any ability to formulate the principle explicitly, but by showing a potentiality to do just that, in the way in which the truth of the principle is presupposed in a multiplicity of

particular practical judgments."<sup>72</sup>

MacIntyre refers to the plain person as initially a plain child, at least like a plain child. No human person begins philosophical enquiry, or sets off on some particular philosophical narrative or constructing some philosophical system, without first having been a plain person, and experienced childhood. And the humility requisite for acquiring the wisdom of philosophy in the fullness of its catholicity requires of every philosopher that he or she become as a little child, as it were, remembering the philosophical journey, and always connecting his or her intellectual movement in such a way that what was known with certainty to be good and true is retained.

This common ground in the plain person, or the plain child, provides the resource by which seemingly irresolvable philosophical disagreements can be resolved. Even though in the fourth level of rational justification, the disagreeing parties seem *prima facie* to have no common ground, they each retain memory of the process by which they themselves moved from the epistemic condition of plain person to their current epistemic philosophical position. They retain the memory of what they knew as plain children in a pre-philosophical state. So when faced with seemingly irresolvable philosophical disagreements, we find here, in principle, by way of memory, a way to move forward by first moving backward. The disputing parties can, in principle, engage in recollection, finding common ground in their former selves as plain persons, or even plain children. From that point they can trace forward their respective paths of philosophical development from that previously shared common ground, accessible to them by

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 135-136, emphasis mine.

recollection. By this mutual recollection they can trace forward their respective intellectual development until they arrive at the point in the past where their philosophical paths diverged regarding substantive philosophical claims. At this point of divergence, they can rationally evaluate their respective intellectual trajectory from shared common ground. Then, when one position has been shown to be preferable to the other, according to standards both parties shared at that time, it becomes clear that one party needs to retrace its steps, as it were, to the point where it took a wrong turn, and get back on the authentic path of philosophical development.

Notice that in this process of resolving the seemingly irresolvable disagreement the disagreeing parties are not presently addressing the present disagreement itself. Instead, they are presently addressing a diverging of their philosophical positions that took place at some point in the past. And they are presently evaluating this past divergence, from the shared viewpoint of their former selves as plain persons. In this way they can engage in what is analogous to the second or third level of rational justification. This mutual recognition and remembrance of our philosophical development from our prior plain-person-self to our present philosopher-self is a development we can mutually evaluate by recollection. And this provides a means, in principle, by which disagreement at the fourth level of rational justification can be resolved. Only by retrieving the common ground shared both by plain persons and by philosophers who each began their philosophizing as plain persons, can such disagreements be resolved.

Implicit in the claim that such disagreements are in principle resolvable in this way, is the notion that authentic philosophical development from the pre-philosophical



standpoint of the plain person cannot lead to contradictory or incommensurable positions. Why should we believe such a notion to be true? The shared starting point of the plain person includes a common body of beliefs acquired through common human experience, as well as a common conception of rationality. If that is the case, then whatever divergences are possible in authentic philosophical development are not ultimately contradictory, but in fact are different expressions of an underlying shared philosophy. Authentic philosophical development from the starting point of the plain person may lead to diversity of expressions of the implicit philosophy possessed by the plain person, but not to contradictions or incommensurable positions. To deny this is to deny the catholicity of philosophy, by denying that philosophical questions and their answers are universal. But the denial of the catholicity of philosophy is not intrinsic to the position of the plain person, nor can it be arrived at by authentic philosophical development from the starting point of the plain person.<sup>73</sup> The plain person, for MacIntyre, makes use of first principles that are not the result of arbitrary stipulation but are necessary preconditions for the very possibility of rational inquiry and ethical practice.<sup>74</sup> Denying the catholicity

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<sup>73</sup> MacIntyre's description of each person's development in ethical understanding follows the pattern, distinguishing between genuine development and one that involves an intrinsic contradiction. He writes, "[T]he plain person is fundamentally a proto-Aristotelian. What is the force of fundamentally here? What it conveys can be expressed in three claims, first that every human being either lives out her or his life in a narrative form which is structured in terms of a *telos*, of virtues and of rules in an Aristotelian mode of life.... "I am also committed to holding that every human being is potentially a full-fledged and not merely a proto-Aristotelian and that the frustration of that potentiality is among his or her morally important characteristics. We should therefore expect to find, within those who have not been allowed to develop, or have not themselves allowed their lives to develop, an Aristotelian form, a crucial and irresolvable tension between that in them which is and that which is not, Aristotelian. The standard modern anti-Aristotelian self will be a particular kind of divided self, exhibiting the complexity so characteristic of and so prized by modernity." ("Plain Persons and Morality," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol.LXVI, No.1, pp.13-14).

<sup>74</sup> "Genuine first principles ... can have a place only within a universe characterized in terms of certain determinate, fixed and unalterable ends, ends which provide a standard by reference to which our individual purposes, desires, interests, and decisions can be evaluated as well or badly

of philosophy is not a philosophical claim, but a skepticism equivalent to the abandonment of philosophy itself. Recovering the relationship of philosophy to its organic starting point in the plain person provides the resource to maintain the catholicity of philosophy and overcome the seemingly irresolvable disagreements currently challenging the legitimacy of philosophy as a truth-discovering practice.