FROM ARISTOTLE — TO — CHRIST

How Aristotelian Thought Clarified the Christian Faith

LOUIS MARKOS

Author of *From Plato to Christ*

ivp | InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.
www.ivpress.com.

CONTENTS

PART 1

HOW TO THINK LOGICALLY

1

WHY IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO BELIEVE SIX IMPOSSIBLE THINGS BEFORE BREAKFAST

Albert Einstein did not invent the formula, $E = mc^2$; he discovered it. In the same way, Isaac Newton discovered, rather than invented, the laws that govern gravitation. The formula and the laws have been written into creation since the beginning; what Einstein and Newton did was pull the curtain away from nature to reveal the careful fine-tuning that governs life, motion, and change in our ordered universe.

Aristotle is the father of logic, not because he invented it out of whole cloth but because he recognized, clarified, and systematized the rules that govern the proper use of our rational faculties. There is an order without and an order within, and they reflect each other. How did Aristotle happen upon that dual order? By moving past mere thinking to engage in the metacognitive practice of thinking about thinking.

The Egyptian builders who lived and worked before Pythagoras could, it seems, determine whether they had a perfect right angle by aligning a three-inch, four-inch, and five-inch strip of cloth into a triangle. They were thinking. What Pythagoras did is think theoretically about such practical thinking to arrive at his famous theorem that in all right triangles, even ones that are invisible, the sum of the squares of the two sides ($a^2 + b^2$) will always equal the square of the hypotenuse (c^2). Like Einstein and Newton after him, Pythagoras did not fabricate his mathematical formulation to grace a fantasy world; he discerned this pattern of relationship in the very warp and woof of the cosmos.

THE LAW OF NONCONTRADICTION

Some two centuries after Pythagoras propounded his theorem, Aristotle took a close look at the kinds of statements people make about God, nature, and their fellow man. Though he could not always be certain whether a given statement was true, he discovered a way to spot statements that could *not* be true. A statement is necessarily false if it violates the law of noncontradiction: something cannot be itself and its opposite at the same time and in the same way.

We can say someone is a young man and an old man at a different time (twenty-five years old today but sixty-five years old forty years from now) or in a different way (young at heart but old in years), but we cannot say he is a young man and an old man at the same time and in the same way. To make such a statement is to violate the law of noncontradiction and to fall into logical error.

A man may be alive and not alive, or believe and not believe, or start a project and finish it at different times, but he cannot be (or do) both the one and the other simultaneously. A woman can be a primate in the sense that she is viviparous (gives live births) and not a primate in the sense that she has reason; she can be a doctor in the sense that she has a PhD and not a doctor in the sense that she does not practice medicine; but she cannot be both a primate/doctor and not a primate/doctor in the same sense.

Aristotle states this foundational law of logic most clearly in *Metaphysics*: "The same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject and in the same respect." He then goes on to add:

> It is impossible for any one to believe the same thing to be and not to be. . . . For what a man says, he does not necessarily believe; and if it is impossible that contrary attributes should belong at the same time to the same subject. . . . , and if an opinion which contradicts another is contrary to it, obviously it is impossible for the same man at the same time to believe the same thing to be and not to be; for if a man were mistaken on this point he would have contrary opinions at the same time. It is for this reason that all who are carrying out a demonstration reduce it to this as an ultimate belief; for this is naturally the starting-point even for all the other axioms. (IV.3; 1005b20-34)

Note that Aristotle does not attempt to "prove" his point. The law of noncontradiction is a foundational principle of logic that is not to be demonstrated but submitted to: one argues *from* it, not *for* it. It is, Aristotle insists, "the starting-point" for all thinking that can properly call itself rational and logical.

The White Queen in chapter five of *Through the Looking-Glass* informs Alice that when she was her age, she was quite capable of believing six impossible things before breakfast. Neither Aristotle nor the sensible Alice will put up with such nonsense. In fact, Aristotle states, boldly and unapologetically, that anyone who thinks that the self-evident law of noncontradiction needs to be demonstrated lacks true philosophical training. To argue against it is to make an argument that, if proved, would make all other arguments impossible. It is to rob the one who denies it of his very status as a rational animal: "If all are alike both wrong and right, one who is in this condition will not be able either to speak or to say anything intelligible; for he says at the same time both 'yes' and 'no'. And if he makes no judgement but 'thinks' and 'does not think', indifferently, what difference will there be between him and a vegetable?" (IV.4; 1008b8-12).

The reserved Aristotle rarely descends to such sarcasm, but he is defending the very possibility of logical thought and rational choice. Using a somewhat snarky reductio ad absurdum—an argument that exposes foundational weaknesses in a claim by showing what happens if that claim is taken to its "logical" conclusion—Aristotle makes it clear that only a fool would refuse to submit, in his daily life, to the law of noncontradiction:

> For why does a man walk to Megara and not stay at home, when he thinks he ought to be walking there? Why does he not walk early some morning into a well or over a precipice, if one happens to be in his way? Why do we observe him guarding against this, evidently because he does not think that falling in is alike good and not good? Evidently, then, he judges one thing to be better and another worse. And if this is so, he must also judge one thing to be a man and another to be not-a-man, one thing to be sweet and another to be not-sweet. . . . Therefore, as it seems, all men make unqualified judgements, if not about all things, still about what is better and worse. (IV.4; 1008b14-27)

Unlike Plato, who put little stock in common opinions held by common people, Aristotle trusted the wisdom of common sense. All of us know quite well that our neighbors, like ourselves, accept without question that two opposing ideas or actions cannot both be true at the same time and in the same way. If we did not do so, our thinking would be random, our judgments haphazard, and our choices indiscriminate.

THE CORRESPONDENCE THEORY OF TRUTH

In Aristotle, we encounter the same firm but jovial common sense of one of the great Christian thinkers of the eighteenth century: British poet, playwright, critic, lexicographer, moralist, and man of letters Samuel Johnson (1709–1784). In his delightful *Life of Samuel Johnson*, James Boswell records an incident from August 1763 in which Dr. Johnson embodied to the full the kind of common-man logical thinking that Aristotle helped usher into the world:

> After we came out of the church, we stood talking for some time together of Bishop Berkeley's ingenious sophistry to prove the non-existence of matter, and that every thing in the universe is merely ideal. I observed, that though we are satisfied his doctrine is not true, it is impossible to refute it. I never shall forget the alacrity with which Johnson answered, striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it, "I refute it *thus*."[1]

Though Christianity is a religion of miracles, it is grounded in the day-to-day realities of history. Indeed, the Christian is only able to recognize miracles because he knows how the laws of nature normally operate and that there is a correspondence between reality and the statements we make about reality. Johnson remains assured that the stone that halts the forward movement of his foot is as concrete, actual, and real as the sharp twinge of pain he no doubt felt when his soft toe connected with the hard rock.

That there is a real, one-to-one correspondence between the things we see around us and the things we say about those things is foundational to Christianity. But it has also been foundational to secular, scientific thought in the West. Neither Baruch Spinoza nor David Hume nor Bertrand Russell nor

[1]James Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson* (London: Henry Froude, 1904), 1:315.

Einstein believed in the God revealed in the Bible; all of them were finally materialists, either rejecting God outright or making him equivalent to nature or the universe. Yet, all four of these nontheistic philosopher-scientists accepted the correspondence theory of truth. Had they not, they could not have propounded their theories about the nature of reality.

Here, in a maddeningly tongue-twisting sentence, is how Aristotle defines the correspondent nature of our world: "To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true; so that he who says of anything that it is, or that it is not, will say either what is true or what is false" (IV.7; 1011b26-29). Science as we know it, whether theistic or secular, would not have arisen in the West had scientists not agreed with Aristotle that the objects and patterns and motions that make up our cosmos bear a direct relationship to the evidence of our senses, the theorizing of our minds, and the words and symbols we use to express that evidence and theorizing in hypotheses, principles, and laws.[2]

No modern science, then, but also no Christian theology. Apart from Aristotle's correspondent view of truth—a view that is assumed but not expressly stated in Scripture—the doctors of the church, whether Catholic or Protestant, would have been hard pressed to express the work and teachings of Christ in defendable doctrines and disciplines and coherent confessions and creeds.

Combining the law of noncontradiction with the correspondence theory of truth, Aristotle describes what the world would be like if truth and falsehood were interchangeable:

> On the one hand, if all opinions and appearances are true, all statements must be at the same time true and false. For many men hold beliefs in which they conflict with one another, and think those mistaken who have not the same opinions as themselves; so that the same thing must both be and not be. And on the other hand, if this is so, all opinions must be true; for those who are mistaken and those who are right are opposed to one another in their opinions; if, then, reality is such as the view in question supposes, all will be right in their beliefs. (IV.5; 1009a7-14)

[2]I discuss the relationship between Christianity and modern science in full in chapter three below.

Only chaos can result when a culture allows contradictory things to be treated as if they were equivalent or cavalierly call something true that does not correspond with reality. Sadly, we are witnessing that very scenario play itself out in North America, Europe, and other countries influenced by modern Western thought.

Increasingly since Samuel Johnson's day, ethical, philosophical, and aesthetic relativism has seized control of academic and popular culture, even making strong inroads into the church. Engaged in a rash, intellectually (and morally) suicidal quest to make all things equally true, we have only succeeded in making all things equally false—erecting in place of Aristotle's search for objective truth a dictatorship of relativism.

The ancient Greeks worshiped a pantheon of arbitrary gods who ruled over a world that was often as arbitrary as they were. Aristotle, like Plato before him, turned the eyes of philosophy toward truths that transcended the petty rivalries and licentious games of Zeus and his divine court. As we will see in part two, the God of Aristotle was ultimately a removed and impersonal one, a fact that unfortunately helped lead Christianity into the dead end of deism during the Enlightenment. Still, by positing an Unmoved Mover who was consistent and coherent, Aristotle brought clarity about the nature of God to the greatest philosopher-theologian of the high Middle Ages.

AQUINAS AND LEWIS ON THE NATURE OF REALITY

Far from an arbitrary deity, the God of the Bible is not only the author of the correspondence theory of truth and the law of noncontradiction; he embodies both in his nature and his being. In question 25, article 3 of his *Summa*, the great Italian Dominican friar, priest, and scholastic Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) poses an essential question of theology: Is God omnipotent? Although he answers affirmatively, he qualifies his affirmation by referring to Aristotle's law of noncontradiction:

> Now nothing is opposed to the idea of being except non-being. Therefore, that which at the same time implies being and non-being is repugnant to the idea of an absolute possible, which is subject to the divine omnipotence. For such cannot come under the divine omnipotence; not indeed because of any defect in the power of God, but because it has not the nature of a feasible or

> possible thing. Therefore, everything that does not imply a contradiction in terms is numbered among those possibles in respect of which God is called omnipotent; whereas whatever implies contradiction does not come within the scope of divine omnipotence, because it cannot have the aspect of possibility. Hence it is more appropriate to say that such things cannot be done, than that God cannot do them. Nor is this contrary to the word of the angel, saying: *No word shall be impossible with God* (*Luke* i. 37). For whatever implies a contradiction cannot be a word, because no intellect can possibly conceive such a thing.[3]

The omnipotent God, Aquinas argues, can do all things that are possible, but even he cannot make being and nonbeing at the same time and in the same way. God cannot do such a thing, not because he is limited in his power but because such a thing is simply impossible, a logical contradiction in terms. The verse he quotes from Luke (Lk 1:37), he argues, does not contradict the law of noncontradiction, for a word that does not correspond with the nature of reality is not a word; it is a meaningless sound, a nonthing.

To the modern—or, rather, postmodern—Christian, Aquinas may seem to be guilty of putting God in a box. But that is not his intent. In the tradition of Aristotle, Aquinas seeks to remain faithful to the rational world that God created, a world that reflects his (God's) rationality and that *corresponds* to the rational structures that God inscribed into the minds of his rational creatures—particularly the supremely ordered (and obedient) mind of Aquinas. It is neither improper nor blasphemous to suggest that God, like any just monarch, follows his own rules.

Seven centuries after Aquinas penned his *Summa*, the great British author, academic, and apologist C. S. Lewis (1898–1963) set himself the task of addressing one of the most difficult and perennial questions asked of Christians: Why, if God is all good and all-powerful, does suffering exist in the world? Most Christians over the centuries have accounted for the existence of evil and pain by referring, at least in part, to man's misuse of free will. Few, however, have thought clearly through the implications of God's decision to endow his human creatures with the gift of free will.

---

[3]Anton C. Pegis, ed., *Introduction to Saint Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Modern Library, 1948), I, q. 25, art. 3 (p. 231).

To set the divine parameters for his freewill apologetic, Lewis, in *The Problem of Pain* (1940), makes a direct appeal to Aristotle and Aquinas's law of noncontradiction:

> *Omnipotence* means "power to do all, or everything." And we are told in Scripture that "with God all things are possible." It is common enough in argument with an unbeliever, to be told that God, if He existed and were good, would do this or that; and then, if we point out that the proposed action is impossible, to be met with the retort, "But I thought God was supposed to be able to do anything." This raises the whole question of impossibility.[4]

Lewis clearly alludes here to the passage from Aquinas quoted above, complete with the biblical reference to Gabriel's words to the Virgin Mary about nothing being impossible for God. Yet, Lewis, like Aquinas and Aristotle before him, qualifies the theological tenet of God's omnipotence to refer only to actions that are intrinsically possible.

From here, Lewis offers his own framing of the law of noncontradiction, noting that opposites are impossible unless an "unless" clause is inserted that bridges the contradiction. Thus, to call back an analogy I used earlier, it is impossible for me to be both an old man and a young man, *unless* I am speaking of myself at two different periods of time. Likewise, it is impossible for a human female to be identical to a primate, *unless* you mean she is identical to a primate in the limited sense that she gives birth to live children. In the absence of such an unless, however, the law of noncontradiction applies. That is to say, if something "is self-contradictory it is absolutely impossible. . . . It has no *unless* clause attached to it. It is impossible under all conditions and in all worlds and for all agents."[5]

With that, Lewis springs on his reader the divine implications of a law he learned, via Aquinas, from a pagan philosopher who did not have access to the Scriptures:

> "All agents" here includes God Himself. His Omnipotence means power to do all that is intrinsically possible, not to do the intrinsically impossible. You may attribute miracles to Him, but not nonsense. This is no limit to His

[4]C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 26-27.
[5]Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 27-28.

> power. If you choose to say "God can give a creature free-will and at the same time withhold free-will from it," you have not succeeded in saying *anything* about God: meaningless combinations of words do not suddenly acquire meaning simply because we prefix to them the two other words "God can." It remains true that all *things* are possible with God: the intrinsic impossibilities are not things but nonentities. It is no more possible for God than for the weakest of His creatures to carry out both of two mutually exclusive alternatives; not because His power meets an obstacle, but because nonsense remains nonsense even when we talk it about God.[6]

There you have it: it is impossible, even for God, to give us free will and not give us free will at the same time and in the same way. To say God cannot do something that is intrinsically impossible is not to put God in a box; it is merely to treat nonsense as nonsense, whether the supposed perpetrator of that nonsense is human or divine.

Though it may seem that Lewis, like Aquinas before him, is putting limits on God, what he is really doing is defending, after Aristotle, the ordered creation God made and acknowledging the ordered minds he gave us to perceive and study that order.

[6]Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 28.