

## SAINT ALBERT THE GREAT—PHILOSOPHER

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IN the world of philosophy, St. Albert stands in a unique position. Philosophers and historians of philosophy are unanimous in according him a place among the few men whose names are permanently blazoned on the very portals of the temple of wisdom. Hertling, Gilson, De Wulf, Ueberweg, Gonzales, Baeumker, Scheeben, to mention only a few of the most noted scholars, insist on his tremendous influence as a philosopher, even apart from his acknowledged eminence as a universal genius. Investigation of the reasons on which they base their conclusions clearly shows that their judgment is well-founded. For Albert, besides being an original and powerful thinker, was a pioneer in a philosophical movement of prime importance. It is our purpose to consider the debt of philosophy to St. Albert the Great from two points of view: first discussing his contributions to the doctrinal content of Scholasticism; then attempting to analyze his profound and extensive influence on all subsequent thought.

Because the philosophy of St. Albert in general closely resembles that of his pupil, St. Thomas Aquinas, it is unnecessary to give here a conspectus or resumé. This is not meant to imply that there are not differences of opinion, and serious ones; yet the generalization is safe. From the viewpoint of doctrinal content, however, St. Albert's contributions were more numerous and more important than is generally realized. St. Thomas gave classical and permanent form to many philosophical doctrines that were original with Albert the Great. For example, the first definite and complete statement of the generally accepted solution of the problem of Universals was formulated by St. Albert. There is, moreover, throughout his works a clear and explicit recognition of the distinction and of the relations between faith and reason, theology and philosophy. He first stated and refuted the pantheistic errors of the Arabian peripatetics. He clarified and perfected the philosophical notion of God, which he borrowed from Aristotle, and he also had some original things to say about the im-

mortality of the soul and the rational proofs thereof. These few examples disprove the unfounded yet common idea that Albert was a mere compiler or purveyor of the opinions he borrowed from others. He was a profound and original thinker, eager to make every possible use of traditional knowledge but unwilling to be limited by it.

Over and above these doctrinal contributions, St. Albert was directly responsible for a tremendous and permanent influence on all subsequent thought, inasmuch as from him came the initial impetus and definite direction of an intellectual movement that is still alive and fruitful.

It was providential that St. Albert the Great appeared at a time when human thought was at the crossroads. The thirteenth century witnessed an intellectual crisis, a period of difficulty and suspense that very naturally produced its most disturbing effects in the two principal branches of knowledge, theology and philosophy. In philosophy the problem arose, interiorly from the unorganized and incoherent condition of the science, and exteriorly from the inroads of Arabian philosophers who were spreading many dangerous theories purporting to be based on Aristotle, but based really on corrupted and interpolated Aristotelian texts. Albert fully grasped both the peril and the possibilities of the situation and with unerring instinct launched himself into it with the very weapons that threatened to bring about intellectual disruption. The Arabian Pantheists and Monopsychists were using Aristotle as the foundation of their dangerous opinions. Albert, too, would use Aristotle, but rejecting the vitiated Arabian texts, he made, as he tells us, long journeys to find copies of the original Greek or Latin translations made therefrom. Using these and the commentaries of the Peripatetic school, he built up a complete course of Aristotelian philosophy, his intention being, as he himself states, to make the philosophy of Aristotle intelligible to the Latins; in other words to make available for the Western World the entire body of Aristotelian thought. To call these works of Albert commentaries is misleading, since they were really paraphrases having very little in common with the true commentary as we have it, for example, from the pen of St. Thomas Aquinas. The purpose of St. Albert was, moreover, totally different from the purpose of a commentator. Albert's aim in using Aristotle was not to construct a system of philosophy based on Aristotelian elements, but rather to introduce the authentic thought of Aristotle to the Western World as the basis and inspiration of further original work. St. Albert accomplished perfectly what he set out to do, and if he had

done nothing else, this one great contribution would have made his name immortal.

Yet, his greatness as a philosopher does not rest on this alone. We have previously mentioned that Albert first made clear and unmistakable the distinction between philosophy and theology. This conception had been developing for centuries, and many Christian philosophers had contributed something to its solution, yet the importance of the bold stroke that made the first definite cleavage can hardly be overestimated. At the same time, and in conjunction with the new movement thus inaugurated, St. Albert gave a new orientation and direction to philosophy by basing it firmly on the experimental sciences. This is not surprising in view of Albert's scientific achievements, but it is very interesting to meet in his works statements on this important matter that might have been written today. To quote only one, he says in one of his works: "Every conclusion which is based on sense knowledge is better than that which contradicts sense knowledge; and a conclusion which contradicts sense knowledge is unworthy of belief; a principle, moreover, which does not agree with the experimental knowledge of the senses is not a principle but rather the contrary of a principle."<sup>1</sup> The quotation is not an isolated one. It could be matched by numberless others, for the works of St. Albert are permeated with the firm conviction that all philosophy must be based on the cold, hard facts of observation and experiment.

To sum up, we have seen that St. Albert made a twofold contribution to scholastic philosophy, first to its doctrinal content, secondly to its spirit and direction. Because Scholasticism is essentially eclectic, progressive and accretive, the doctrinal contributions of any one man are always of merely relative importance. For this reason we are inclined to attach a greater significance to the second phase of St. Albert's influence, which is so important and fruitful as to be unique in the history of philosophy. If Scholasticism is firmly based on the magnificent sanity and decisive logic of the Peripatetics, to Albert must go much of the praise. If Scholasticism is rationalistic rather than mystical, and objectivist rather than authoritarian, it was Albert who helped to give it these qualities. Finally, if Scholasticism is experimental and inevitably bound to the realities of life, it was Albert who forged the decisive link.

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<sup>1</sup> *Physicorum*, VIII, tr. II, c. 2.