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Maritain and Rifkin: Two Critiques

"The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything save our modes of thinking, and we thus drift toward unparalleled catastrophes."

Albert Einstein

Maritain delivered his compact, yet cogent, lecture, which in translation and book form bears the title *The Twilight of Civilization*, at the Marigny Theatre in Paris on February 8, 1939, a week short of seven months before Hitler's invasion of Poland and the beginning of World War II. It is a prophetic essay in its assessment of the political forces already at work in prewar Europe, shaping the future destiny of civilization. Employing his gift for understanding and interpreting the movement of historical events by tracing the influence exerted upon them by their attendant ideologies, Maritain's essay displays not only shrewd political savvy but also a great depth of philosophical insight.

In his essay, Maritain identifies the contrast between Communism and Fascism as a "totalitarianism of the social community" on the one hand, and a "totalitarianism of the political state and racial community" on the other hand.¹ The French philosopher understood, however, that these two political ideologies were in themselves symptomatic of two corresponding philosophical positions concerning human nature which were their causes; and although the twilight of Western civilization was being occasioned by the increasing power and influence of these two political ideologies, Maritain's lecture wisely focuses upon their under-

¹Jacques Maritain, *The Twilight of Civilization*, trans. Lionel Landry (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1943), 17.

lying philosophical positions. For, regardless of whether we know or wish to acknowledge it or not, theoretical principles always have consequences in the practical order.

As a Christian philosopher, Maritain does not surprise us by his distinction among three types of humanism: the first two of which are entirely secular, while the third is contrastingly Christian. Maritain identifies the first as "Classical or Anthropocentric Humanism." It avers a human nature and reason that is turned-in and shut-up upon itself; it espouses a human self-sufficiency that is the source of its own solutions to whatever problems, public or private, social or political, may be encountered. It is a humanism which glorifies the notion of *Progress* and the promises of the Enlightenment, as it separates the human from, and denies it any connection or relation with, the Divine.²

The second form of humanism, unique to the twentieth century, Maritain refers to as "Counter-Humanism or Anti-Humanist Irrationalism." This form of humanism is the culmination of the historical evolution of classical Enlightenment humanism—it is characterized by the hollow emptiness of the existential void. About this evolution, Maritain writes:

Well, all of this simply did not work: the unfolding of the story—of history—has shown it clearly enough. After having put aside God in order to become self-sufficient, man loses his soul; he seeks himself in vain, turning the universe upside down in his effort to find himself again. He finds only masks, and, behind those masks, death.³

The third form of humanism which Maritain identifies is Christian or Integral Humanism. In this version, human nature is not only causally rooted in the Divine in metaphysical dependence, but spiritually transformed and redeemed by grace through Jesus Christ.⁴

In *The Twilight of Civilization*, Maritain contends that, because the *bourgeois pharisaism*⁵ of the nineteenth century was finally revealed for the

²*Ibid.*, 4-6.

³*Ibid.*, 6.

⁴*Ibid.*, 11-14.

⁵*Ibid.*, 6-11.

masquerade that it was, there followed an "irrationalist tidal wave,"⁶ the effects of which were being witnessed by a Europe poised on the brink of madness. The truth of this observation was certainly obvious in the social/political arena, the ostensible subject of Maritain's essay. Astutely, however, Maritain uses his analysis of this new manifestation of *counter-humanism*⁷ to explain the root causes of the evils immanent in both forms of those totalitarian storm-clouds then sweeping over Germany and the Soviet Union, and threatening the peace and security of Western Europe and, eventually, the entire world.

Maritain's analysis of the failure of classical, anthropocentric humanism in relation to the political realities of 1939 displays his uncanny metaphysical insight. His conclusion and lasting admonition is, in the end, quite simple: political systems grounded in any humanism that is not Christocentric are doomed, in any age and corner of the world, to the misfortunes of "materialism, atheism, anarchy bearing the mask of State-Despotism, and finally dictatorship...."⁸ For this reason, his remarks concerning political governments and his critique of the aberrant forms of humanism which underlie them retain a timeless validity.

Yet attractive and seductive errors die slowly (if at all); and if as Americans in the fifties and sixties we waved the flag of freedom proudly, unthreatened by any immediate dangers to our national security, all the while blissfully unaware of the underlying Christian humanist philosophy that was the theoretical ground that sustained these liberties, I suspect that presently the evidence is compelling that our culture at that time also began to embrace yet another, though different, manifestation of classical, Enlightenment humanism. What began as a tentative, unarticulated pre-supposition soon became a new social creed, one that placed its faith in science and technology, confident that they would create a better world, enhance the quality of life, solve humanity's problems, and bring us to that *New Frontier* which President Kennedy both proclaimed and symbolized. The economic and industrial successes which had become such a part of postwar American society, coupled with the proliferation of technological advances and achievements were together instrumental in rekindling this anthropocentric-humanist be-

⁶*Ibid.*, 8.

⁷*Ibid.*, 8.

⁸*Ibid.*, 58.

lief in the salvific power of scientific knowledge and technological mastery.

Since that time, however, after half again as many years from the essay of Maritain's to which we pay tribute, we again hear the truth of his words: "Well, all this simply did not work." Health and environmental problems of colossal proportions continue to capture headlines with increasing frequency and seriousness. The disillusion of failed promises from atomic energy technology, the pollution of our soil, water and air, the hazards of pesticides, chemical additives and animal-antibiotic residues in our food and drinking supplies, the erosion of the ozone layer in the atmosphere, *Acid Rain*, and the foreboding threat of the *Greenhouse Effect* have all rained on science's parade of otherwise breathtaking achievements in medicine, space, computer technology, communications, and genetic engineering, to name but a few.

If the cliché that the idealism of the sixties gave way to a pragmatism of the seventies has been left incomplete concerning a prevailing conscience of the eighties, I suggest that the concurrence of the successes and failures of science and technology in the past three decades have culminated in not one but two divergent consciences for the eighties. On the one hand, we can observe a blissful agnosticism on the part of those who choose to enjoy the appearance of bounty and economic prosperity of the eighties while ignoring the warning signs of serious potential danger. On the other hand, we find a dedicated activism of those who, in various degrees of expression in word and deed, take the present ecological health-report seriously, and endeavor to raise the consciousness of both the general public and her elected representatives so that changes in public-policy decision-making might be made before it is too late.

It is against a background such as this that we can best appreciate the critique of science and technology made by Jeremy Rifkin in his book, *Declaration of a Heretic*.⁹ Although he is not a professional philosopher, it is nonetheless instructive to observe that his critique of the scientific and technological foundations of Western culture reflect in the ecological order conclusions similar to those of Maritain in *The Twilight Of Civilization* concerning the political order.

Rifkin's motivation for developing his critique grows out of his as-

⁹Jeremy Rifkin, *Declaration of a Heretic* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985).

assessment of the present dangers which the two most significant scientific achievements of the twentieth century have created. In December of 1942, American physicists produced the first sustained nuclear reaction; a decade later, Watson and Crick unraveled the molecular structure of DNA and discovered the double helix. With these achievements, we entered the Atomic and Genetic Ages respectively, and we now face the uneasiness that comes from our appreciation of the assumed benefits and potential risks.

Rifkin contends that our uneasiness and confusion are generated by the fact that our culture holds *unqualified faith* in the ability of science and technology to create a problem- or trouble-free world, and that, in the face of its failure to do so, we tend as a culture to deny the fact that the present precarious position in which we find ourselves is actually a result of the very faith-system, namely a scientific world-view, which received our unquestioned trust and affirmation. Our malaise, Rifkin says in a fashion reminiscent of Maritain, "is rooted in our ideas about security and the nature of what it means to be a human being."¹⁰

The drive to overcome our basic experience of insecurity lies at the heart of the human quest for a knowledge that enables us to have the power to control our environment. This basic thrust, although a foundational characteristic of human nature as Rifkin sees it, is neither our nature's exclusive feature nor is it inexorably tied to only one necessary way of looking at the world. For our Western tradition, the prevailing epistemology has been the *scientific* approach, where science has come to be understood as a way of penetrating the secrets of reality in order to control the environment to our own best advantage, and ultimately using the power which is derived from it as a means of satisfying our innate desire for security. The roots of this notion of science are not to be found with Aristotle and the ancient Greeks, however. Rather, in tracing the sources of our contemporary ideas about science and our humanist faith in its promises, Rifkin, in a fashion again reminiscent of Maritain, prudently indicts the Enlightenment philosophers:

Today's orthodoxy is steeped in the catechism of the Enlightenment. The apostles of truth are no longer Peter, Paul, John, Mark and Luke. They are Bacon, Descartes, Newton, Locke and Darwin.¹¹

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 26.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 4.

Under the influence of Enlightenment humanism and its ideas concerning the nature and purpose of knowledge and the mechanical, empirical nature of the material world, Rifkin contends that the natural human drive to overcome our species's fundamental insecurity led to the Enlightenment formula concerning our relationship to the natural world: namely, that "Knowledge is Power, Power is Control, Control is Security." This formula continues to exert its unquestioned influence over the thinking of all of Western culture.

Just as Maritain identified the different forms of government as rooted in the different types of humanism, so too Rifkin observes that it is our thinking about human nature that underlies our ideas about overcoming our innate insecurity. "What becomes transparent in re-examining the ideas that comprise our existing world view," Rifkin writes, "is that it is our attitudes about 'human nature' that govern the approach we take to insuring our own security."¹² Once again, theoretical principles have their consequences in the practical order.

Rifkin's remarkable challenge to this prevailing scientific world-view is not to echo the oft heard call for a responsible use of technology or an ethical conscience for scientific research. His position is more radical. After detailing the serious threats and dangers posed by Atomic Energy technology and Recombinant DNA technology throughout the main sections of his book, Rifkin draws the perhaps startling conclusion (his *Declaration of Heresy*) that what needs to be changed is our very thinking about science itself which has deceived us into believing that an increase in scientific knowledge always means more power and that more power and an increase in technology and the efficiency of business ultimately translates into more progress and increased security and benefits for the human species and, indeed, the entire planet.

While acknowledging the enormity of the task of reorienting our culture's prevailing scientific way of looking at the world, Rifkin does mention four specific areas where he believes signs of an alternate consciousness have already begun to appear. Additionally, he names several twentieth century examples of people (Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa) who, in the witness of their lives, have embodied the very ideas he calls to our reflection. Moreover, through an extensive bibliography, the author also identifies a whole new "generation of scholars" who

¹²*Ibid.*, 28.

are working to "redefine our approach to knowledge, redirect our relationship to technology, reformulate our ideas about the nature of economic activity, and re-establish a new framework for achieving security."¹³

These are the four specific areas (knowledge, technology, economics, and power/security) for which Rifkin proposes alternative ways of thinking—alternatives worthy of serious consideration and reflection by professional philosophers. Specifically, Rifkin proposes that 1) for "Controlling Knowledge" we substitute "Empathic Knowledge"; 2) for "Controlling Technologies" we substitute "Empathetic Technologies"; 3) for an "Economics of Exploitation" we substitute an "Economics of Stewardship"; and 4) for the "Exercise of Power" we substitute the "Renunciation of Power" as the expression of true strength and as the means for attaining genuine and lasting security for the human family. Finally, in the place of the Enlightenment formula that "Knowledge is Power, Power is Control, Control is Security," Rifkin's alternative vision proposes that "Knowledge is Empathy, Empathy is Participation, and Participation is Security."

Naturally, these terminological *buzz-words* can not convey the richness of Rifkin's developed thought. For the present, however, the following summary should provide a sufficient indication of the spirit and vision that animates his ideas:

Changing world-views means changing basic assumptions about how we choose to organize ourselves and the world around us. Do we use the human mind to seek power over the forces of nature, or to empathize with the rest of the living kingdom? Do we use technology to maximize our advantage over the environment and each other, or to establish an equitable give-and-take relationship between all living things? Do we define economic activity in terms of growth and unlimited expansion, or in terms of borrowing and maintaining a proper regard for nature's ability to replenish itself? Do we define security as exercising greater control over our surroundings, or as participation in the larger communities of life that make up the ecosystems of the planet?¹⁴ However radical these ideas may seem, or however extraordinary and distant from common folk the people of his examples may be, Rifkin's

¹³*Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 98-99.

final conclusion certainly has appeal for us as Christian philosophers, not to mention as disciples of Jacques Maritain. For underlying the changes in our thinking about knowledge, technology, and economics is the more fundamental change in our thinking about power/security; a change, Rifkin tells us, which can only be successfully accomplished by careful reflection upon the true meaning of our Biblical and Divine command to have *dominion* over all of God's creation. Mistakenly, Rifkin contends, our culture has generally interpreted that mandate as a justification for the exercise of power, control and domination. Rather, Rifkin reminds us that we are called to view our role as one of steward and caretakers.

A steward's role is to preserve, to restore and to heal....[Stewards] participate with and nurture other things.

Their sense of security does not come from being in control, but rather from taking care of other beings.¹⁵

Nevertheless, reverential stewardship itself is only possible if we affirm a Christocentric humanism, or at least a humanism that affirms that not only is God the creator of the natural universe and that our dependence is in a personal God, but also that it is the causal participation in God's divinity which gives to all of creation its proportioned sanctity, and which places this gift under our sacred care. This is the *sine qua non* for the vision of stewardship; life must be "resacralized at every level of existence."¹⁶ In this regard, at the foundational level of their respective critiques, Maritain and Rifkin share a common vision and spirit.

Regardless of whether we consider Maritain in the political order or Rifkin in the ecological order, the essence of their respective messages is the same: a view of life that is cut-off from its sacred rootedness in the Divine is destined not only to failure but also to serious, negative consequences. In the political order, the result is aberrant, totalitarian forms of government that bring war and untold human suffering; in the ecological order, the result is aberrant views of science and power which threaten the very delicate balance of nature's ecosystems and thus threaten the very survival of the planet itself.

The lesson of their respective critiques is also quite clear. The stakes

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

cannot be higher, and, as a consequence, their respective admonitions are worthy of serious heed. For Maritain, it is the dignity and sanctity of human life in the social/political order involving truth, values, freedom, and the preservation of human rights. For Rifkin, it is the dignity and sanctity of human life in the techno/ecological order involving the care and protection of the natural environment and the future of human and planetary survival.

Both are essential to the attainment of true human happiness and fulfillment. Only this time, particularly in the latter case as perhaps never before in history, there may be precious little margin for error, since, in the words of the Worldwatch Institute, "Good Planets Are Hard To Find."