

Introduction

Nova et Vetera: Maritain as Critic

Jude P. Dougherty

In the second year of his pontificate, Leo XIII promulgated the encyclical, *Aeterni Patris*, August 4, 1879, endorsing a fledgling Thomistic movement which was to enlist some of the best minds of the following generation. That encyclical was followed by the founding of philosophical institutes at Louvain and Washington for the purpose of making available the thought of St. Thomas as an antidote to the then dominant positivisms and materialisms. The *Institut Supérieur de Philosophie* under the direction of Desiré J. Mercier came into being in 1891; the School of Philosophy at The Catholic University of America under the direction of Edward A. Pace in 1895. The *Institut Catholique de Paris* was already twelve years old when Leo became Pope and the *Institut* in due course was to play an important role in the Thomistic revival. Jacques Maritain was to be offered a professorship there in 1914.

Leo recommended to the Catholic world the study of St. Thomas because of the perceived value of his philosophy in meeting "the critical state of the times in which we live." Leo saw that the regnant philosophies of his day not only undercut the faith but were beginning to have disastrous effects on personal and communal life. Succinctly he says in *Aeterni Patris*, "Erroneous theories respecting our duty to God and our responsibilities as men, originally propounded in philosophical schools, have gradually permeated all ranks of society and secured acceptance among the majority of men."

By any measure, the 19th century was no less an intellectually tumultuous one for Europe than the 20th. Dominated in the intellectual order by the Enlightenment, Anglo-French and German, Europe underwent a systematic attempt on the part of the intelligentsia to replace the inherited, largely classical

¹ Maritain reproduces this encyclical in his *St. Thomas Aquinas: Angel of the Schools*, trans. J. F. Scanlon (London: Sheed and Ward, 1948), 134-154.

and Christian learning, by a purely secular ethos. The Napoleonic wars in their aftermath added materially to the destabilization, eradicating many institutional structures, economic, and social as well as religious.

St startling advances in the physical sciences reinforced the Enlightenment's confidence in natural reason. In retrospect we can see that the ideas which formed the secular outlook of the 19th century were the product of two major intellectual revolutions. The first is associated with the biological investigations of the period and with the names of Spencer, Darwin, Wallace, Huxley and Haeckel. Their work employed the vocabulary of "evolution," "change," "growth" and "development" and led to the worship of progress. The effect of the new biological studies was to place man and his activity wholly in a materialistic setting, giving them a natural origin and a natural history. Man was transformed from a being with a spiritual component and a transcendent end, elevated above the rest of nature, into a purely material organism forced to interact within a natural environment like any other living species.

The second revolution resulted from advances in physics that were taken to be a reinforcement of the fundamental assumptions of a mechanistic interpretation of nature. Convinced that all natural phenomena can be explained by structural and efficient causes, the disciples of Locke and Hume discarded any explanation invoking the concept of "purpose" or of "final cause."

The convergence of these concepts in physics and in biology made possible the resurgence of a purely materialistic concept of human nature with no need for the hypothesis of a creative God or of a spiritual soul. The foremost symbol of the new outlook became Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1859). For an intellectual class it codified a view which had been germinating since the preceding century. Darwin confidently marshalled evidence and systematically formulated in a scientific vocabulary ideas already available, but the spontaneous acceptance of his doctrine of evolutionary progress was possible only because the philosophical groundwork had been laid by the Enlightenment Fathers.

Leo XIII was not alone in his assessment of the situation. On both sides of the Atlantic various philosophical idealisms were created in a defensive effort to maintain the credibility of religious witness. Challenged by purely naturalistic interpretations of faith, many found the rational support they needed as believers in a post-Kantian idealism. *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, the first journal of philosophy in the English language, was founded at St. Louis, Missouri in 1867, the same year that the *Institut Catholique de Paris* was created, for the dual purpose of making available the best of German philosophy and of providing the Americans with a philosophical forum. In the first issue of the journal, William Torrey Harris gave three reasons for the pursuit of speculative

philosophy. According to Torrey, speculative philosophy provides, first, a philosophy of religion much needed at a time when traditional religious teaching and ecclesiastical authority are losing their influence. Secondly, it provides a social philosophy compatible with a communal outlook as opposed to a socially devastating individualism. Thirdly, while taking cognizance of the startling advances in the natural sciences, it provides an alternative to empiricism as a philosophy of knowledge. Speculative philosophy for Harris is the tradition beginning with Plato, a tradition which finds its full expression in the system of Hegel.

II

Jacques Maritain was born just three years after *Aeterni Patris*. By the time Maritain discovered St. Thomas, the Thomistic movement was well under way. It was a movement that not only nourished his searching intellect, but one which he substantially enriched. He came to Thomas, he would say, already a Thomist without knowing it. Maritain's influence eventually extended worldwide, notably to Italy, to Latin America, especially Argentina, and to North America.

The convert early on placed his intellect in the service of the church. He knew first hand the contemporary intellectual milieu and shared Leo's assessment of the dominant philosophies, philosophies clearly at odds with the Catholic faith. "If I am anti-modern, it is certainly not out of personal inclination, but because the spirit of all modern things that have proceeded from the anti-Christian revolution compels me to be so, because it itself makes opposition to the human inheritance its own distinctive characteristic, because it hates and despises the past and worships itself. . ."²

Maritain's critique of Luther, Descartes and Rousseau and his early critique of his mentor, Henri Bergson, display an intellect fully aware of the impact of ideas and philosophical systems on the practical order. Much of that early work would not today withstand professional scrutiny, largely because of its apologetic character but also because it was often marred by a vagueness and imprecision which his critics easily exploited. Furthermore, Maritain did not in practice always keep clear the distinction between philosophy and theology. It made him later an easy target for American philosophers, such as Sidney Hook and Ernest Nagel, who were schooled in the prevailing pragmatic naturalism. It also hurt his chance for an appointment at the University of Chicago. Robert M. Hutchins, as chancellor of the University of Chicago, three times tried to get Maritain appointed to its faculty of philosophy. The department blocked the

² *Ibid.*, ix-x.

appointment each time, even when Hutchins offered to pay his salary from non-departmental funds, because in the words of one member of the department, "Maritain is a propagandist." Hutchins shot back, "You are all propagandists." On another occasion Hutchins sent an emissary, probably John Nef, to the chairman of the department, a well known positivist. The response to Hutchins was, "Maritain is not a good philosopher." The emissary then asked, "Do you have any good philosophers on your faculty?" The answer, "No, but we know what a good philosopher is."³ The faculty at that time was led by George Herbert Mead and James Hayden Tufts. Ironically, one would have to be a specialist in the history of American philosophy to know their names, whereas the achievement of Jacques Maritain as a philosopher is acknowledged throughout the West.

One must concede that the chairman of the philosophy department at the University of Chicago may have had it right when he said, "Maritain is an apologist." He was one all of his professional life. But Maritain was philosophizing within a Thomistic framework where philosophy in the service of theology loses nothing of its integrity. In fact, as Maritain consistently affirmed, the philosopher himself may gain insight by his association with a theological perspective which thrusts new problems and demands greater precision. Maritain maintains that philosophy in the abstract is pure philosophy and can never be "Christian," but concretely it is always pursued within a social setting which in providing a milieu for reflection, gives it color, if not direction. In *Existence and the Existent* he writes, "We do not philosophize in the posture of dramatic singularity; we do not save our souls in the posture of theoretic universality and detachment from self for the purpose of knowing."

As a critic of modernity Maritain was at times violent and cutting. Raïssa was to say of his style, "As for the men whose ideas he criticized, he certainly respected them personally, but they were for him scarcely more than vehicles for abstract doctrines."⁴ Étienne Gilson, when asked by a journalist to comment on the difference between his method and that of Maritain, characterized Maritain's as one that sets bare ideas in juxtaposition, submerging the individuality of the philosophers who espoused them. Speaking of his own technique, Gilson said, "It is more important to try to understand ideas through men . . . in order to judge in a way that unites . . . Pure ideas, taken in their abstract rigor are generally irreconcilable."⁵ But Maritain

³ Cf. Milton Mayer, *Robert Maynard Hutchins: A Memoir* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 118.

⁴ *Memoirs*, 353, as quoted by Donald and Idella Gallagher, *The Achievement of Jacques and Raïssa Maritain*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1962), 12.

⁵ Laurence K. Shook, *Étienne Gilson* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1984) 194.

was not put off. His response: "It is not psychology, but the critique of philosophers which brings truth to light." Where truth is concerned there can be no compromise. One ought to be tenderhearted and tough-minded, not hardhearted and softheaded. Yet Maritain could say, "I am content to owe something to Voltaire in what concerns civil tolerance, and to Luther in what concerns nonconformism, and to honor them in this." In *Theonas* he acknowledges a respect for Comte insofar as he seeks the realization of human order, for Kant for the restoration of the activity of the knowing subject, and for Bergson for the recognition of the spiritual.⁶

III

It is commonly acknowledged that Maritain's best work in the area of social and political philosophy was accomplished during his years in America. What gives that work power, however, is its grounding in a solid metaphysics of being and in a realistic epistemology. Maritain the metaphysician is at his best in his *A Preface to Metaphysics* and in his *Existence and the Existent*. As a theorist of knowledge he produced *The Degrees of Knowledge*, *Philosophy of Nature*, and *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*. With the exception of the last mentioned, those works formed the background to his political philosophy, a political philosophy that had considerable influence on important thinkers such as Mortimer J. Adler, John Courtney Murray, and Yves R. Simon and on more than one generation of Thomists who staffed the then flourishing Catholic colleges and universities in the United States. Many students were first exposed to philosophy through his clearly written *Introduction to Philosophy*.

It is Maritain's recognition of the practical effects of the materialisms and empiricisms of his day and his critique of the Enlightenment spirit which determine his life's work. One of his earliest books sets the tone for much that is to come. The myth of "necessary progress" as found in philosophers like Condorcet and Comte is one of his major targets in *Theonas*, a dialogue first published in 1921. He quotes Condorcet, "There will then come a moment upon this earth when the sun will shine on none but free men who recognize no other master than their reason; when tyrants and slaves, priests and their stupid hypocritical instruments, will exist no more save in history and on the stage."⁷ And Auguste Comte, "To re-establish the Catholic order it would be necessary to suppress the philosophy of the eighteenth century, and as this philosophy proceeds from the Reformation, and Luther's Reformation in its turn was but the result of the experimental sciences introduced into Europe by the Arabs, it

⁶ *Theonas*, trans. Frank J. Sheed (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1933), 172.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 117.

would be necessary to suppress the sciences."⁸ Maritain, through the character Philonous, responds to Comte as follows: "That surely is a perfect text, I know it by heart: and it illustrates as clearly as the historico-economic synthesis of Karl Marx—What havoc the myth of progress can work in the mind of an intelligent man."⁹

As Maritain characterizes it, "the law of progress" demands the ceaseless changing of foundations and principles inherited from the past; but if foundations can change, that which rests on them must also change. The movement of humanity towards the better, according to Comte and his disciples, implies the repudiation of all previous gains. The progressivists, Maritain suggests, fail to recognize that there are types of change. Some change can be constructive as Thomas appropriating Augustine or the Copernican revolution incorporating Ptolemaic astronomy. To use a homey example, the production of a plant is bound up with the corruption of the seed. "There is no destruction," he argues, "that does not produce something, no production that does not destroy some existent thing. The whole question is to know whether it is the production or the destruction which is the principal event."¹⁰ Judgment is required. The conservative takes newness to be a sign of corruption; the mystics of revolution take all newness for a newness of achievement. Placed in perspective, the myths of "humanity," "the city of the future," "revolution" and "necessary progress" are but secular substitutions for Christian ideas such as the "church," the "heavenly Jerusalem," "regeneration" and "providence." "When men cease to believe in the supernatural," Maritain says, "the Gospel is reduced to the plane of nature."¹¹

Although Maritain's early targets are Bergson and the three reformers, his real enemy is Immanuel Kant. In Maritain's judgment, Kant's critical philosophy is born of the convergence of the three intellectual currents represented 1) by Luther's revolt in theology, 2) by Descartes' in philosophy and 3) by Rousseau's in ethics. Kant represents a lack of confidence in the intellect's ability to metaphysically grasp being. Bergson similarly underestimates the intellect, but Maritain is willing to commend Bergson for attacking the anti-metaphysical prejudices of 19th century positivism. Still, in Maritain's judgment, Bergson's notion of intuition and his theory of conceptual knowledge leads, not unlike Descartes, to a subjectivism and irrationalism. In retrospect, Maritain may be seen to have more in common with Bergson than not; he nevertheless saw the difficulty of maintaining an objectivist metaphysics and even natural science on Bergson's somewhat anti-intellectualist epistemology. In Maritain's judgment, both Bergson and Kant give too large a role to the activity of the experiencing subject in constituting the known. Maritain's conviction that the realism of

⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.⁹ *Ibid.*, 126-27.¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 137.¹¹ *Ibid.*, 139-40.

Aristotle and Aquinas is perfectly in accord with common sense and with modern science finds full expression in his mature work, *The Degrees of Knowledge* (1932).¹²

Maritain provides this insightful notion of how philosophies differ. "Modern philosophies" he writes, "grow out of what has gone before, but rather by way of contradiction; the Scholastics by way of agreement and further development." The result is that philosophy in our day is like a series of episodes simply stuck end to end, not like a tree where each is organically related to each and all to the roots.¹³ "The labor of the mind, by its very nature demands a collaboration running through the years." There is such a thing as a *philosophia perennis*; though its source is in antiquity, it is forever open-ended.

IV

In the closing years of his life Maritain returned to themes which he first approached as a young convert grateful for the insight provided by his newly acquired faith. In the last decade of his life, the old philosopher equipped with both the faith and years of experience reflects at length on the condition of his beloved Catholic Church. Between 1966 and 1973 he produced three books. One may view these simply as works of apologetics, but one may also find in them profound philosophical insight. The most widely noted was his *Le Paysan de la Garonne* published shortly after the close of the Second Vatican Council when Maritain was eighty-four years of age. *On the Grace and Humanity of Christ* appeared in 1969; *On The Church of Christ* followed four years later.

Acknowledging that he was writing in a "troubled historical moment," Maritain presents *On the Church of Christ* as a reflection of a philosopher on the faith, a faith accorded him through the instrument of the Church. The book, he proclaims, is not a work of apologetics; "It presupposes the Catholic faith and addresses itself above all to Catholics, (and) to our nonseparated brothers who recite the Credo each Sunday."¹⁴ It addresses itself to others to the extent that they "desire to know what Catholics believe even if the latter seem sometimes to have forgotten it."¹⁵

The last is not an idle remark. In Maritain's judgment, Vatican II unleashed a subversive movement in the Church which constitutes, perhaps, an even greater

¹² Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959).

¹³ *Theonas*, 5.

¹⁴ *On the Church of Christ*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973), vi.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

threat to her integrity than the external modernist attack of the 19th century. "The modernism of Pius X's time," he writes, was "only a modest hay fever" compared to the sickness which besets the intellectuals today.¹⁶ In *Le Paysan*, he speaks of an "immanent apostasy." The new theologians through an exhausting work of "hermeneutic evacuation" have emptied our faith of every specific object and reduced it to a "simple sublimating aspiration." "The frenzied modernism of today is incurably ambivalent. Its natural bent, although it would deny it, is to ruin the Christian faith."¹⁷ Ironically, Maritain says, the leaders of our neo-modernism declare themselves Christian, even though they have separated themselves from its basic tenets. In a way, their attitude is a backhanded compliment to Christianity itself, since they still cherish their identification with the Church.

Responding to a frequent claim, Maritain asks, "if divine transcendence is only the mythical projection of a certain collective fear experienced by man at a given moment in history," then why should an observer faithful to the tradition "be astonished that so many modernists believe they have a mission to save a dying Christianity, their dying Christianity for the modern world."¹⁸ Simply put, modernism and Christianity are incompatible.

A Greek confidence in the human intellect and in the intelligibility of nature is the cornerstone of Maritain's philosophy of being. It led him, on first acquaintance, to an appreciation of the realism of St. Thomas whom he came to venerate both as a person and as a philosopher/theologian. Even before the end of the Second Vatican Council, Maritain sadly detects a drift away from St. Thomas on the part of Catholic theologians. Disparaging references to St. Thomas and the Scholastics and the call to de-hellenize Christianity, he is convinced, is usually a repudiation of philosophical realism and the first step toward a subjectivism which reduces the revealed word of God to mere symbols for truths accessible to human reason. He finds this regrettable not only because it marks off the repudiation of a great teacher but because of its implications for theology as a discipline. Theology, heretofore, was thought of as "rational knowledge." The new approach, by contrast, when it does not reduce the faith to *praxis*, seems to adopt a fideistic starting point; Christ is the way, if one is inclined to adopt Him as a guide.

In an aside, Maritain notes, "some of our well bred contemporaries are repelled by the vocabulary of Aquinas." Yet it is hard to believe that men who understand Hegel, Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre should be terrorized by

¹⁶ Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne*, trans. Michael Cuddihy and Elizabeth Hughes (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), 14.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

scholastic rigor. They should know perfectly well that every science has its technical vocabulary.¹⁹ Their difficulty lies much deeper, in the skepticisms they have unwittingly embraced, skepticisms which deny the intellect's ability to reach being in knowledge and in speech. The only way we can logically and clearly express many of the truths of the faith is by appropriating the language of ontology. If we cannot know reality in itself but only as it appears to us, what are we to make of the teachings of Chalcedon, i.e., that Jesus Christ is one person with two natures, one divine and one human? What are we to make of the doctrine of the Eucharist?

V

Speaking of method, Maritain says, the teaching of Aquinas "is not the doctrine of one man, but the whole labor of the Fathers of the Church, the seekers of Greece, . . . the inspired of Israel"²⁰ and the scholars of the medieval Arabic world. Far from reaching a dead-end, the Thomistic corpus "is an intelligible organism meant to keep on growing always, and to extend across the centuries its insatiable thirst for new prey. It is a doctrine open and without frontiers; open to every reality wherever it is and every truth from wherever it comes, especially the new truth which the evolution of culture or science will enable it to bring out."²¹ It is, too, a doctrine open to the various problematics it may see fit to employ, whether created from within or adopted from without. Because it is an open doctrine, it is indefinitely progressive. Those who adopt the philosophy of St. Thomas recognize that their master does not require subservience. "The philosopher swears fidelity to no person, nor any school—not even if he be a Thomist—to the letter of St. Thomas and every article of his teaching."²²

Josiah Royce saw this more than a half century earlier. Writing as an outsider, he was convinced that the neo-scholastic movement endorsed by Leo XIII was an important one, in Royce's words, "for the general intellectual progress of our time." The use of St. Thomas, he says, entails growth, development and change. He even uses the word "progress." "Pope Leo, after all, 'let loose a thinker' amongst his people—a thinker to be sure, of unquestioned orthodoxy, but after all a genuine thinker whom the textbooks had long tried, as it were to keep lifeless, and who, when once revived, proves to be full of the suggestion of new problems, and of an effort towards new solutions."²³ But Royce was

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.²⁰ *Ibid.*, 153.²¹ *Ibid.*²² *Ibid.*, 161.²³ *The Boston Evening Transcript* (July 29, 1903), reprinted in *Fugitive Essays* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1925), 422-23.

also fearful that a resurgent Thomism might give way to the Kantian legions and their demand that the epistemological issue be settled first. In Maritain he would have found a kindred spirit.

The key to Maritain's conception of philosophy, his love for St. Thomas, and his chagrin at contemporary drifts in theology is grounded, as I said, in his doctrine of being. "To maintain . . . that the object of our intellect is not the being of things but the *idea* of being which it forms in itself, or more generally that we apprehend immediately only our ideas, is to deliver oneself bound hand and foot to skepticism."²⁴ Maritain's controlling principle can be stated simply: being governs enquiry. There are structures apart from the mind which can be objectively grasped. Or put another way, being is intelligible, and not only being, but being in act is intelligible. The senses bring us into contact with a material, changing world, but in the flux of events there are identifiable structures which control enquiry. Although the senses are limited to the material singular, there is more in the sense report than the senses themselves are formally able to appreciate. The intellect's ability to abstract enables it to grasp the universal, the intelligible nature, the "whatness" of the thing. Those things which are not self-intelligible need to be explained by means of things other than themselves.²⁵ Acknowledging the principles of substance and causality, Maritain avoids the phenomenalism of Locke and the empiricism of Hume. So equipped, he is able to reason to an immaterial order and to the existence of God, *ipsum esse subsistens*. Maritain's defense of the first principles of thought and being in his little book, *A Preface to Metaphysics*, is difficult to surpass.

Philosophies which fail to achieve a doctrine of being will inevitably be subjective in tone. Methodologically, they will be cut off from the transcendent source of being itself. Oddly, philosophy seems to entail a theology whether it reaches God or not. "When Feuerbach declared that God was the creation and alienation of man; when Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God, they were the theologians of our contemporary atheistic philosophies."²⁶ They define themselves and their projects against a tradition they hope to supersede, but one in which their own roots are planted. "Why are these philosophies so charged with bitterness," Maritain asks, "unless it is because they feel themselves

²⁴ Jacques Maritain, *Elements of Philosophy*, trans. E.I. Watkin (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1930), 186.

²⁵ Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, trans. L. Galantiere and Gerald B. Phelan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1948), Chap. I, 10-46; *A Preface to Metaphysics* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1948), Lectures II-IV, 43-89.

²⁶ Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, 137.

chained in spite of themselves to a transcendence and to a past they constantly have to kill."²⁷ Theirs is, in fact, a religious protest in the guise of philosophy.

VI

The essays which constitute this volume are the fruit of the 1993 Annual Meeting of the American Maritain Association. The reader should not seek a unity of outlook among the contributors. There are almost as many starting points, assumptions and methodological tacks as there are contributors. Certainly not all contributors can be called disciples of Maritain or even of St. Thomas. There are almost as many references to Heidegger as there are to Maritain. Many of the essays succumb to the contemporary vice of taking ill-defined abstractions seriously, abstractions such as postmodernism, deconstructionism, feminism and Thomism. Yet in common with Maritain all the authors, without exception, have an appreciation for classical learning; all write from a "realistic" perspective; all recognize that ideas have consequences in the practical order.

One can believe that if Maritain were writing today his assessment and critique of so-called "postmodernism" would not be substantially different from that taken by the contributors to this volume. If anything he would likely be more pugnacious and cutting. Having lived through the modernist period he could only view postmodernism as the *reductio ad absurdum* of the former.

²⁷ *Ibid.*