

Introduction

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One of the great ironies of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is that an age positively awash in information ranging from the smallest subatomic particles to distant galaxies, structured by technological gadgetry produced by the most exacting scientific knowledge, and blessed by instant global communication, has a hard time believing that anything is true. In science, perhaps, we still value the notion of objective knowledge and the unbiased observer, though several postmodern currents have put even that form of truth into doubt.¹ But in all fields that touch upon the essential human things, we have either no truth or too many “truths,” a skepticism that we can know anything at all, or a bewildering jumble of competing and conflicting arguments, which appear to admit no finally valid claims to truth.

While this predicament is hardly new—Plato and Aristotle spend a great deal of time sifting through the truths, falsehoods, and partial insights of their predecessors and contemporaries in search of a consistent way of thought—widespread acceptance of the hopelessness of trying to resolve problems and reconcile apparent contradictions may have reached something of a high (or low) water mark in the past one hundred years. And as is abundantly clear from the many seemingly insoluble questions that have arisen in our politics and social relations, our current crisis is not merely of interest to philosophers, or political theorists, or abstract thinkers of other kinds. It is the very atmosphere that we all, willing or not, now breathe. Incoherence seems to have become the very form of our culture.

It was largely in response to earlier manifestations of these circumstances

¹ For a good account of this emerging problem, see Paul R. Gross, Norman Leavitt, and Martin W. Lewis, eds., *The Flight from Science and Reason* (New York: Academy of Sciences, 1997).

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that Jacques Maritain and his wife Raïssa dedicated themselves to renewing philosophy. For them, this was not a purely intellectual task. Early in their married life they made a mutual suicide pact. If they could not find their way out of confusion into a worthy and noble form of life, they preferred not to live. In a way they were repeating a basic philosophical impulse common to all ages and places. A reflective being like the human person can never be entirely content with mere animal and social existence. Our very natures demand and reach out for something that we cannot name at the outset and that transcends the various earthly things that we may try to substitute for it. This is one explanation for the passionate—and disastrous—commitment of many people to murderous ideologies in the century just past: Communism, Fascism, Nazism, nationalism, scientism, and other ersatz religions. Collective ideals, like other substitutes for the transcendent, may give us a sense of meaning and purpose in the short run. In the long run, they reveal themselves as a dangerous delusion.

Jacques Maritain was born into a liberal Protestant family and found himself in a world that placed great faith in science. He quickly perceived, however, that science itself could provide no answers to his most burning questions. Many people then and now blame science for our predicament. But as Mariano Artigas demonstrates in an incisive essay in the present volume, the very expectation that science has anything to say about non-scientific questions is not science's fault. Rather, the view that science can be made to affirm or deny truths that do not fall within science as currently understood is a *philosophical error*—committed by scientists and non-scientists alike. Science needs to be contextualized through other modes of thought, particularly by people concerned with religion: "Dialogue between science and religion requires a common partner that can be neither science nor religion. Philosophy is a good partner, probably the only real candidate."

This point has often been made. Many of us are dissatisfied with the low materialist science combined with skepticism that marks the West today. But how can philosophy perform this task? To begin with, it must identify certain presuppositions that often go unnoticed in a scientific culture. Take order in nature. Artigas remarks: "Empirical science studies natural patterns, which means order. The concept of order is so general that it can be considered a quasi transcendental." He adds that other notions such as organization, directionality, synergy, and complexity—to say nothing of the ethical questions that do not fit into value-free inquiry—offer other material for philosophical analysis. The very fact that human beings are able to make mute nature speak in intelligible terms suggests that human beings occupy a position that is both part of nature and that transcends mere nature.

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True philosophy, then, by its very nature is a form of rationality that includes the human person in its irreducible transcendence. But this realization must lead us into much broader speculations on the nature of the intellectual life today. In his contribution to the present volume, Ralph McInerny rightly points out that the Maritains recognized this truth in the very way they chose to live out the intellectual vocation. In addition to Jacques' formal teaching, the Maritains hosted in their own home a diverse group of professional philosophers and people from all walks of life, and differing faiths, who passionately wished to engage the entire range of philosophical questions raised by the modern world. Philosophy done this way was not merely cerebral; it involved an understanding that the pursuit of wisdom demands the commitment of one's whole life.

The Thomist revival, in which they both played a major part, is often dismissed as a sectarian Catholic position, at best of intellectual interest in certain respects, but more probably just one more failed attempt at total explanation. But this is to misconceive the very nature of the kind of thought they developed and their model of philosophizing, rooted in Aristotle and Saint Thomas Aquinas. As T. S. Eliot once observed, Aristotle has no method other than to be "very intelligent," and later students of the great Greek did him a disservice by turning his work into "Aristotelianism," just as some followers of Aquinas mistakenly turned the later thinker into a "Thomist." The great value of both is that, in McInerny's words, they "seek sustenance anywhere and everywhere." That universality is what a Catholic philosophy at its best must pursue. Or as John Paul II observed in the encyclical *Faith and Reason*, the Implicit Philosophy that begins in the universal acknowledgment of certain principles and starting points is not merely one kind of philosophy, it is philosophy itself, rightly understood.

As a Frenchman, Maritain was particularly sensitive to the fact that many of the problems we currently face stem from a doctrinaire Cartesianism that, in its various permutations since Descartes, makes it impossible for us ever to get outside of our own minds. As useful as Descartes's thought may have been during a period of epistemological crisis, it became in the hands of other philosophers less a foundation for all valid thinking than a philosophical strait jacket that limits philosophy, which used to think it could range over the whole of the universe. For many subsequent thinkers, philosophy could only move within the kinds of rational propositions still permissible after the sure connection with the external world had been broken. Only the most reverent attention to reality at this point would allow us to break free of philosophy's self-imposed limits. Few professional philosophers are willing to make this effort or even to accept the principle as vital for real philosophy itself.

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Descartes himself had to sidestep this problem. In a telling passage from the *Discourse on the Method*, he says:

I have first tried to discover generally the principles or first causes of everything that is or that can be in the world, without considering anything that might accomplish this end but God Himself who has created the world, or deriving them from any source excepting from certain germs of truths which are naturally existent in our souls. After that I considered which might be deduced from these causes, and it seems to me that in this way I discovered the heavens, the stars, and earth, and even on the earth, water, air, fire, the minerals and some other things. . . .(Part VI)

Later thinkers, of course, would dispute even this move, but it gave Descartes a way to talk about things outside of the bare assertion of the *Cogito*.

Charles Péguy, one of Maritain's early mentors who admired, as did Maritain, the way that Henri Bergson had made it possible again to recover "the sense of the absolute," responded to this drily:

Well, I say: what does it matter. We know quite well that [Descartes] did not discover the heavens. Rather, they were found all by themselves. Creation needs its Creator, to be. To become, to be born, to be made. It had no need of man, neither to be, nor even to be known. The heavens were found all by themselves. And they have never been lost. And they do not have need of us to be perpetually rediscovered in their orbits.²

This good sense cuts off at its root the notion that everything, including nature, is or should be derived from the workings of the human mind. Detected, perhaps. Assigned in various modes to the human sciences. But the things themselves are there whether any man comes to know them or not.

In a brilliant analysis in the present volume, Gavin T. Colvert outlines the ways in which some forms of postmodernism, notably that of Richard Rorty, have performed the double task of breaking with the narrow Enlightenment rationality that descended from Descartes, but at the cost of the broader kind of philosophy that posits truth. For Rorty and many others in his wake, philosophical systems previously discarded, such as medieval philosophy, may be re-admitted to a respectable status because, with the break-up of Enlightenment rationalism, all philosophical systems may now be seen to be socially constructed and finally unjustifiable. So the faith-reason, theology-

² Charles Péguy, *Note Conjointe sur M. Descartes et la philosophie cartésienne, Œuvres en Prose, 1909–1914* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1957), pp. 1301–02. This work was left unpublished when Péguy died in 1914, but was probably written during that year.

philosophy dialogue that marked medieval philosophy and its modern offshoots is no less—or more—legitimate than other systems that posit some form of absolute truth in God or nature.

For Rorty, however, all such external authority is unfounded. We remain solely within the constructs of the mind and society. In the course of explicating various solutions and alternatives to these problems, Colvert wisely notes: “Perhaps the medievals, who lived in a less sanitized cultural space than ourselves, and who understood very well the reality of suffering and death, were better placed to see the mind-independent structure of reality.” The Christian philosophy of the Middle Ages, unlike its modern and post-modern counterparts, did not place as much emphasis on the self, and invited the thinker to openness towards self-transcendence in both God and nature. Whatever philosophical problems transcendence entails, it is clearly a more expansive and inclusive kind of philosophy than the dominant form.

It is no accident that Rorty and other prominent postmodernists propose a philosophical system despite their own principles. For them, philosophy is a kind of therapy that should purge us of impulses towards seeking any outside authority in God or nature. But since this leaves very little in the way of public principle, Rorty, a committed American-style democrat, proposes that the only authority worthy of philosophical deference is “a consensus of our fellow humans.” Of course, this begs the question of how we can know that others exist when we cannot find any reliable principle in nature or elsewhere. Democratic pragmatism becomes a kind of transcendence all its own, but locates its standards in mere consensus or majoritarianism.

Curiously, this position partially reflects an old Catholic notion of the community as an important factor in the pursuit of truth. For Christians, the Bible and the traditions that have evolved from the sacred text offer important clues to the philosopher carrying out his own proper task. Philosophy alone, of course, cannot substitute for revelation or theology. But it can, within its own domain, reflect on material offered to it from those domains and the living communities they have inspired. Historically, that engagement produced some remarkable work that preserved communities from setting themselves up as their own absolute arbiters of the whole of reality. That openness to transcendence had a salutary effect on the communities themselves. One reason for the evident crisis in the developed democracies today is precisely their reliance on the kind of insubstantial appeal to the community that Rorty advocates. Far different is the view of former dissident, now Czech president Václav Havel, a profound thinker who experienced several unfortunate aspects of undemocratic reality: “If democracy is not only to survive but to expand successfully and resolve . . . conflicts of

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cultures, then, in my opinion, it must rediscover and renew its own transcendental origins.”³

How can people who value both liberty and the transcendent pursue this quest? Modern notions of scholarship and the intellectual life have been of little help, in fact have contributed towards creating the predicament Havel deplors. In his contribution to the present volume, John Goyette identifies a bifurcation that has been hidden behind even Catholic academic practices for some time. Saint Augustine represents one model: secular learning for the sake of theology. This approach obviously has its advantages and drawbacks. The greatest advantage is that we can never be under the illusion, under such a scheme, that our learning has some kind of ultimate value in itself. The world is not measured by man; the world provides standards of reality for us. But at least in our own time, such principles often seem to stand in the way of quite proper development of disciplines along their own fruitful paths, or at least that is the claim that is often made by critics. The problem seems to be that first principles, which are the beginning and end of other activities, are often made to usurp the intermediate conceptions that each discipline must discover.

Augustine himself saw little value in studying literature and science, for example. Many other Christian thinkers have pointed out that, while things that lead to salvation and human flourishing should be given priority, we should not conceive of these categories too narrowly. St. Thomas Aquinas advocated study of the Creation because errors about creatures sometimes lead to errors about the Creator. Many of the great early modern scientists, notably Galileo and Newton, were believers who thought that their work helped to understand God’s Creation rather than merely what erroneous thinkers had thought about the Creation. Confusion over this point has often made it appear that Christianity opposed the use of our God-given talents to understand the world. Aquinas had already struck the right balance: He warned of a common deformation in the intellectual vocation: “it is through creatures that man’s aversion from God is occasioned” (*Summa Theologiae* II, q. 9, a. 4). But nonetheless observed: “Right judgments about creatures belong properly to knowledge.”

So there is a danger in studying Creation, but the same danger that we run in any study. The remedy for this is not to proscribe such study but to seek to inscribe it in our spiritual concerns. In dealing with some dangerous ideas of late antiquity, an age that had not yet been reshaped by Christianity, Augustine

³ Václav Havel, “The Spiritual Roots of Democracy,” speech given in Prague, Czechoslovakia, 1991.

may have been right to be careful about secular learning. In our time, Christians need to engage all knowledge, not in an attempt to reduce it to the mere slave of Christian thought, but to appreciate what may be gained from it.

Goyette points to Newman as proposing another Christian ideal of learning. Before the postmodern revolution exploded the very idea that there could be disinterested knowledge, many of us, believers and non-believers alike, thought learning was to be pursued for its own sake. Several distinguished Christian writers such as John Henry Newman and C. S. Lewis⁴ have supported this view. Indeed in *The Idea of a University*, Newman provided as good a defense of the idea as we are ever likely to have. But for those of us who have seen the results of this allegedly disinterested pursuit, many doubts arise that lead us into a consideration of the foundations and very nature of rationality. And it may be that Newman's ideal, which could count on a fair amount of consensus outside the university, today needs to be supplemented.

To begin with, in religious terms, is it really possible to pursue something for its own sake? Is not this to set up an idol among the very real achievements of the intellect? Of course, it all depends what we mean by the term learning for its own sake. If we mean that humane learning, articulated as it must be into various disciplines, must adhere to practices congruent with the given subject, and that such learning will ultimately be of some sort of use if rightly carried out, the answer is certainly yes. All the real modern achievements have true value for human life and may indirectly lead to a better appreciation of faith.

The problem is that if we take learning for its own sake to mean that the intellect's achievements can have some absolute value in themselves, the term is patently false. Humane learning cannot provide the principles for its own validation any more than Descartes's reason could discover the world. Within a framework of moderate realism, perhaps, the notion of disinterested learning may have some validity. But Newman, Goyette reminds us, is forced to the concession that, though it does not necessarily have to be this way: "Knowledge, viewed as knowledge, exerts a subtle influence in throwing us back on ourselves, and making us our own centre, and our own minds the measure of all things." Even worse, it develops in us a spirit of arrogance about our own achievements (a spirit not unknown on both secular and religious campuses).

Newman's solution was St. Philip Neri's. We need, outside the academic confines, another movement—towards holiness. Newman was quite aware

⁴ For Lewis's view, see "Learning in Wartime," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Macmillan, 1980), pp. 20–32.

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that, internal to the university, the study of theology was important, if only so that the university could live up to its own ideal of examining all knowledge. But as the history of secular and religious universities since his day has demonstrated, the mere presence of theology is not an automatic remedy. It is not only that the physical and biological sciences essentially established an independent kingdom for themselves (a problem that is rather easily dealt with by proper philosophical and theological formation). More worrisome, the disciplines that exist on the margins between science and the humanities—especially psychology, sociology, history, economics, and political science—tend to take the materialist assumptions of science as iron rules for the disciplines, rather than to include the ampler vistas on human things afforded by Christianity and other religious traditions.

What is the solution to this impasse? The very best thinking on these matters—much of which is reflected in these essays—will have little impact if it is not embodied in institutions. Individual teachers and learners, of course, must do the best they can until such time as better notions of the intellectual endeavor emerge. But that will take time and no little labor. In his contribution to the present collection, Frederick Erb III delineates some possible options for our moment. Catholic and other religious institutions, which still have intellectual resources that state and secular universities lack, need to think deeply again about the way they carry out their dual mission. This rethinking must do more than affirm a vague commitment to Christian scholarship. The enormous growth of higher education since World War II put pressure on religious institutions to imitate their non-religious counterparts. This had positive and negative effects. Faculties at religious institutions became more “professional,” as professionalism is currently understood. But they also became less religious than they once had been. In those colleges and universities, we need a much more energetic attempt to reconcile the gains of the recent past with an older understanding of the institutional mission.

One important and much neglected opportunity is the growing movement to establish Catholic Studies Programs at secular institutions. This may seem impossible in an America that has come to understand the separation of church and state as requiring the banishing of religion from state-supported education. But European universities seem to have had much less difficulty in accommodating Catholic and Protestant teaching within pluralistic frameworks. As Erb points out, over eighty-five percent of Catholic students today study at non-Catholic institutions. Either those millions of young people must be simply abandoned or we must find ways to have some degree of teaching about Catholicism present at secular institutions. Catholic Studies Programs

come in many forms and not a few have serious pitfalls. But Erb is certainly right that, at their best, they offer a promising approach to bringing Catholic thought to large numbers who will receive higher instruction in Catholic matters in no other way.

Rabbi Leon Klenicki puts a difficult question to this whole enterprise. Can the kind of intellectual work within Christian faith offered by many of the contributors to this volume accommodate or engage in truly respectful dialogue with members of other faiths, Judaism in particular? There is no single or easy answer to this question. Certainly, the great medieval philosophers drew a great deal on Jewish and Islamic sources. But medieval culture generally excluded or marginalized Jews and Muslims. The whole troubled history of Jews in what was once called Christendom cannot be overlooked by people who want to be faithful to the whole of the truth. Christian-Jewish dialogue has been more fruitful in our time than in any previous age, but does that give us reason to believe that the fear of Jews and other non-Christians can be easily managed?

A great deal hinges on how we conceive of that dialogue. Klenicki criticizes the Vatican's recent document *Dominus Iesus* and Maritain himself for their belief that Christianity has superseded its Jewish origins. He would prefer a recognition on the part of Christians that Judaism remains a valid and continuing path to salvation. In strictly logical terms, this may be impossible. Both Maritain and the Vatican are simply, in a sense, stating a truism. Catholics of course are convinced that theirs is the true religion willed by God, just as Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists are about their own faiths. Without that recognition, we would fall into the very common and erroneous view that somehow all faiths are equally valid despite their differences with one another. Whether these inevitable commitments are the equivalent of the historic "teaching of contempt" for Jews cannot be decided in advance. We have to see how individuals and whole groups relate to one another in real terms, despite their deepest commitments.

But such objections usefully remind us that the intellectual life carried on from the standpoint of faith will, in modern pluralist societies, need to be especially vigilant not to fall into close minded blindness of its own. A culture infused with Christianity owes all people's consciences the deepest respect. As difficult as it may be, all institutions of higher learning need to be open to the light that may be available from all sources to remain true to the kind of philosophy Maritain himself saw as the ideal. In the Jewish case—and to a large degree in Islam—there are profound convergences in views about Creation, the nature of the human person, God's providential action in history, and the ultimate end of human life. Such broad agreements cannot resolve all

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the very real differences between different faiths. But they should not be underestimated as foundations for a respectful dialogue that is united in the belief that all human beings are made in the divine image and consequently are engaged in the perennial task of knowing—and living—truth.