

BERGSONIAN RECOLLECTIONS IN MARITAIN

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That Jacques Maritain is one of the greatest, if not the greatest, Catholic intellect of the twentieth century is something which most members of the American and Canadian Maritain Associations would readily admit. Yet it is this very greatness of Maritain which makes him somewhat enigmatic. For, on the one hand, his reputation for greatness is partly built upon his association with the work of St. Thomas; on the other hand, however, his reputation lies in the very original manner in which he utilizes the wisdom of St. Thomas to confront issues of modern and contemporary thought. Indeed, Maritain's originality is, at times, so profound that it is easier to read St. Thomas in order to get some insight into Maritain than it is to read Maritain to get some insight into St. Thomas.

This paper is devoted to Maritain's originality. As such, it is designed to get some awareness of the creative genius of Maritain; it seeks to probe the core of Maritain's thinking so as to uncover how, if in any way, Maritain's thinking departs from the thought of the Angelic Doctor so as to give Maritain's teaching an essence of its own - an essence which makes it Maritainian as opposed to Thomistic or Bergsonian, or anything else.

It seems fitting that such an undertaking begin with an intuition for, as a student of Bergson, and given his way of interpreting St. Thomas, Maritain himself would agree that this is the most appropriate place to begin. Indeed, if, as we contend, Maritain is one of the greatest Catholic intellects of our time, Maritain's own words dictate that we begin with intuition, for he says as much directly in *Bergsonian Philosophy and Thomism*. "It is true," he states, "as Bergson has expressed it,...that each of the great philosophers has spent his whole life developing in every possible direction, a single intuition; in reality the intuition in question has been an intellectual intuition, a living intellectual perception expressible in concepts."¹

The question which we wish to consider in this paper is, "Is there a single intuition expressible in ideas or concepts which formally distinguishes Maritain's thought as Maritainian, and, if there is, what is it?" What we wish to propose in this paper is that we seek to answer this question by looking at

Maritain's work, *Bergsonian Philosophy and Thomism*, as Maritain's own intellectual autobiography. Within this work, we wish to suggest, is indeed contained the seed of the fruit which blossoms later on in works such as *Existence and the Existent* and *Degrees of Knowledge*. To understand these later works of Maritain, one must, we think, first understand the original intuition which began to take root in Maritain's first book - for just as the whole of any science is contained in its principles so, in a way, the whole of Maritain's thought is contained in *Bergsonian Philosophy and Thomism*.

What, however, is the intuitional seed which lies at the foundation of Maritainianism? We contend that it is the intuition that the Bergsonian critique of the intellect could be rectified within the wisdom of St. Thomas. For Maritain the primary mistake of the Bergsonian doctrine of intuition is that it opposes intuition to the idea, to the concept, to abstract knowledge, and to reasoning. It presumes that an intuitive grasp of the real, true attainment of the real, must occur without a subjective intermediary between the subject and the object. For Bergson, that is, true apprehension of the real must be a lived coincidence which takes place without the intervention of concepts or of the intellect. This is so because concepts for Bergson are wholly practical instruments (they are wholly utilitarian signs), and because for him the human intellect is not made for truth - it is made to fabricate. For Bergson man is not *homo sapiens*; he is *homo faber*.²

Having made concepts and the intellect obstacles to knowledge, rather than its specific instruments, having made the function of ideas and of the intellect something practical rather than something speculative, Bergson, Maritain thinks, is forced by logical necessity to seek the specific instrument of philosophy in a non-conceptual and non-intellectual reality. As Maritain sees it, philosophical intuition for Bergson "is sought outside of and above the normal functions of the intellect. It is called *supra-intellectual* intuition."³ For Bergson the specific instrument of philosophy is neither the concept nor the intellect; it is spirit and intuition. Beyond the concept and abstraction, "intuition bears upon spirit."⁴ "In other words, a direct and supra-conceptual grasp of the nature of spirit, an immediate and concrete perception of the metaphysical universe, fugitive as it is said to be and contrary to the natural bent of the intellect, is the sole organ proportionate with philosophical knowledge to the extent that this knowledge rises above matter."⁵

In Maritain's mind the mistakes made by Bergson about the matter of the nature of the intellect, of the concept, and of intuition, were no small errors. They were mistakes which Maritain would recall for the rest of his life, and the intuition of these mistakes was, we believe, the negative first principle of Maritainian thought. We think, however, that these egregious errors of Bergson caused in Maritain a mistake of equally egregious proportions. For, just as Bergson had gone wrong in reducing the concept to a practical tool, and the intellect to a practical device, so Maritain was

equally wrong in attempting to counteract Bergson's extremism with an extremism of his own.

The Bergsonian critique of the intellect and of the intuition could be restored, Maritain thought, within the framework of the epistemology of St. Thomas, but the key to this restoration lay in recognizing that the proper order of the intellect, of the concept, and of philosophy, is not the practical order, but the speculative order. "...Bergsonian philosophy," Maritain states, "operates with the intellect not according to its proper and properly speculative mode...."⁶ For philosophy properly so-called "approaches things *modo speculativo* only."⁷ Indeed even practical philosophy is philosophy for Maritain only because it is speculative in its mode. For him the proper mode of the intellect is not fabrication; it is speculation. Hence the proper mode of philosophy and of philosophy's proper instrument - the concept - is similarly speculation, not fabrication.⁸

The philosophical consequences of this sort of speculative reductionism on Maritain's part are nothing short of enormous. Maritain was convinced that Bergson's practicalistic reductionism had led Bergson to misunderstand the nature of the intellect and to view philosophical intuition as a violent and unnatural act, albeit one which produces metaphysical ecstasy.⁹ Maritain thought that if Bergsonian philosophy were rehabilitated according to a properly speculative philosophical mode it would, as he himself put it, "release and order its potencies in the great wisdom of St. Thomas."¹⁰ It is our contention that the doctrine of Jacques Maritain is this rehabilitated Bergsonianism releasing and ordering its potencies in the great wisdom of St. Thomas. What we find in Maritain is an "inverted"¹¹ Bergsonianism translating into the language of later scholastic Thomism and speculative metaphysics the major principles of Bergsonian thought.

To support this contention let us take a look more closely at some of the criticisms which Maritain levels against Bergsonian philosophy in general and specifically, and let us consider whether or not we find Maritain applying inverted Bergsonianism to his own interpretation of St. Thomas. When we do this we find Maritain faulting Bergson for doing the following: 1) seeking philosophical intuition over and above the normal function of the intellect; 2) denying to the concept its proper role as the specific instrument of philosophy, and incorrectly appropriating this role for spirit (a felt and lived coincidence of the human subject in the process of becoming); 3) attributing to non-conceptual intuition a speculative and metaphysical grasp of the real - a grasp which is said to be contrary to the natural bent of the intellect; 4) making the concept a practical tool; 5) making the proper activity of the intellect practical; 6) identifying the real with becoming rather than with being; 7) presuming that, for intuition to attain the real, intuition cannot occur with any subjective intermediary; and 8) failing to make a real distinction between God and the world.¹²

Having found these faults in Bergson, Maritain was, nonetheless, both indebted to Bergson and convinced that Bergsonian thought could be rectified. He himself put it: "I have several times remarked in my book that, if one were to transfer to intellectual perception properly so called - which takes place by means of abstraction, and whose object is being - certain of the values and privileges that Bergson attributes to 'intuition,' the Bergsonian critique of the intellect would find itself as it were immediately rectified and, instead of ruining our natural power of attaining the true, would be directed only against the wrong use of it."¹³ Maritain's problem, however, was how precisely to rehabilitate the Bergsonian intuition by transferring to speculative intellectual abstraction some of its values and privileges.

Obviously this could not be done unless one were to know precisely where Bergson goes wrong in his own doctrine. According to Maritain, the "essential vice" of the Bergsonian doctrine of intuition lies in "undertaking from a wrong angle to deal with the immediate character of intuitive knowledge...." In doing this, "it supposes that all knowledge truly attaining the real must be a lived coincidence, without subjective intermediary of the subject and the object, thus known, it is thought, in all the plenitude of its reality, thus exhausted to the very root; Bergsonism then opposes its intuition to the idea, to the concept, to abstract knowledge - and to reason, to discursive knowledge."¹⁴

To remedy this situation the key for Maritain is to consider knowledge of the real to be a lived coincidence, not without subjective intermediary but with it. Knowledge of the real does not occur without ideas; it occurs with them. Thus intuition is not opposed to conceptualization, abstraction, reasoning, or discursive knowledge; it is naturally joined to them. In thus considering knowledge, however, two problems occur: 1) what becomes of the genuine intuition of the Bergson of fact; and 2) what justification do we give for claiming that intuition can use subjective intermediaries and still be called "intuition"?

With respect to the first question, the genuine intuition of Bergson is resituated by Maritain in the realm of productive knowledge (*poieton*). "If one brings this 'intuition' back to its true proportions....," Maritain tells us, "one finds oneself facing an effect of the whole being which normally has its place in the creative invention of the artist or in the psychological application to an internal observation. This effort remains intellectual but, because it is a question of penetrating the contingent singular, the intelligence in it is 'pushed out of doors,' into the domain peculiar to sense."¹⁵

For Bergson metaphysical intuition of real duration ends "in a fusion of the mind in the thing, it transports us into the object and identifies us by an intense and even painful effort of sympathy with what is unique, inexpressible, incommunicable in the thing,...with matter itself - which,

united to form, makes the singularity of the thing."¹⁶ Metaphysical intuition thus "projects us into the object and makes us coincide with reality in its very depth. This intuition, according to Bergson, is related to animal instinct much more than to reason and, because Bergsonian intuition has a purely speculative nature, whereas everything in us is ordered to practice, this intuition 'demands of us an effort contrary to nature.'"¹⁷

Now, is not this description of Bergson's metaphysical intuition an uncanny verisimilitude of Maritain's view of the philosophy of art? For Maritain philosophy *qua* philosophy is speculative. Science is of the universal. It is achieved in intellectual abstraction, and is the proper domain of man-the-rational-animal. Man *qua* man is at home in the speculative realm. His knowledge, strictly speaking, is a speculative apprehension of universals, and his abstractive intuition consists in removing from the object of knowledge whatever is material, contingent, and particular.¹⁸ Hence, at best, man has only an indirect knowledge of the singular by reflection from the senses or by affective connaturality. Man's intellect is projected into the unique, inexpressible, and incommunicable in a thing through affective sympathy, and, thereby, finds itself in a place much more related to instinct than to reason. Since everything in philosophical intuition is ordered to speculation, this intellectual projection, in a way, demands an effort contrary to the nature of the intellect and philosophy. Maritain himself states:

In order to...establish a general theory of art and making we must have recourse to the highest and most universal concepts and principles of human knowledge. Such a theory therefore belongs to the domain of philosophy.

The province of philosophy thus defined is indeed practical, since it is concerned with making, and its object is to order from above the branches of practical instruction. Nevertheless, since it is in the strict sense a science, it cannot be essentially practical, but remains essentially speculative in virtue of its object, method, and procedure; moreover it is extremely remote from actual practice. Indeed not only has it no concern with the application of rules of art to a particular work to be accomplished, but further it formulates rules which are far too general to be capable of such immediate application and to be correctly termed rules of art in the strict sense; it is therefore practical only in an improper sense and very imperfectly.¹⁹

Having thus placed Bergson's own intuition into the realm of the creative artist, Maritain is still left with the question of how intuition can remain intuition and yet be a lived coincidence with a subjective intermediary. The answer for Maritain lies in rehabilitating the notion of intuition and in relocating both intuition and speculative concepts within the range of intellectual abstraction. Maritain puts it this way:

For Bergson, as for St. Thomas, knowledge, if it attains the absolute, must be a vital act which establishes a sympathy, a communication, a real assimilation between object and subject. But he ascribes this act to an intuition foreign to the intellect, contrary to our nature, an intuition which

absorbs the spirit in the materiality of the object. St. Thomas on the contrary teaches that by intellectual perception it is the object itself which, thanks to 'abstraction,' being present in the understanding, makes it produce like a common first fruit of life the mental word (*verbum mentis*) and thus finds itself assimilated to the immateriality of intelligence. The latter then becomes the object in a perfectly vital way.²⁰

For Bergson the real signifies time, and intuition is the lived and felt coincidence of the duration of the subject and the duration of the object in the materiality of the thing.²¹ For Maritain, on the other hand, the real signifies being, and intuition is the lived and felt coincidence of the being of the subject and the being of the object in an intellectually immaterial super-existence of the subject.²²

The problem for Maritain, however, is to express as best he can in the epistemological language of St. Thomas how the being of the subject and of the object coincide in intellectual intuition. Maritain accomplishes this goal by doing three things. 1) He extends the meaning of the word 'intuition' to cover both the scholastic and Bergsonian senses. (For him the scholastic sense of intuition is knowledge of a singular, physically present reality, while the Bergsonian sense of intuition is an immediately felt and speculative projection of spirit into the matter of the real.) Maritain's own meaning of intuition is a direct knowledge of a thing which does not result from reasoning. 2) Maritain distinguishes among three Thomistic meanings of intuition as a direct perception: a) sense intuition in which we directly perceive an individual physical being not in its essence but in the action it exerts upon our organs of sensation in its accidents here and now in space and time; b) a directly and immediately felt intuition of the active self connaturally obtained in the apprehension of the intellect's own operations; and c) intellectual abstraction. 3) To correspond to these three meanings of intuition as direct perception he distinguishes three forms of *esse*: a) *esse naturae*; b) *esse cognitum seu objectivum*; and c) *esse intentionale*.²³

The coincidence of the subject and the object in intellectual intuition requires for Maritain all of the above, that is: 1) extending the meaning of intention; 2) the three meanings of direct perception; and 3) the three forms of *esse*. It especially requires the last of these, which Maritain states is founded upon the use of the real distinction between *esse* and nature in everything which is not God.²⁴ The reason for needing all these divisions is that, for the subject and the object to coincide in a sympathy of being, a union between the subject and the object must take place in an existence which is neither accidental, subjective, nor objective. He says:

The essence of such an activity [intellectual intuition] is not to produce but to *become* or to *be*, in virtue of oneself, infinitely above and beyond simple existence in one's own nature; so that, becoming thus by intellection that which is not us, knowledge does not only issue complete from the knowing mind; at the same time it issues complete from the object known.

It is so true that what formally constitutes intellection is a certain doubling of existence, or rather, if I may say so, an active *superexistence*, peculiar to spiritual natures....²⁵

The way this superexistential union is achieved is, for Maritain, through an immaterial transformation of knowledge.²⁶ Knowledge must be made to pass from one essential degree to another through the abstraction of the *intellectus agens*.²⁷ For Maritain, "there is a rigorous correspondence between knowledge and immateriality. A being is knowledgeable in the measure of its immateriality."²⁸ The reason for this is that to know is "to become another thing than oneself."²⁹ To know, that is, for Maritain, consists

in a degree of existence greater than that of being removed from nothingness: it is an active, immaterial super-existence, by which a subject exists no longer only in an existence limited to what it is as a thing included in a certain kind, as a subject existing in itself, but with an unlimited existence in which it is or becomes so by its own rightful activity and that of others. To know then becomes identical with advancing oneself to an act of existence of super-eminent perfection, which, in itself, does not imply production.³⁰

Knowing, in short, for Maritain, is a *vital* speculative identification of knower and known which projects a knower into the known through spirit, in much the same fashion as Bergsonian intuition projects the knower into the real through felt sympathy. The vital identification for Maritain is not achieved through felt sympathy with becoming, but through intellectual sympathy with possible being.³¹ Still, Maritain states, "this point, which is of capital importance, must be emphasized. Bergson is perfectly right in demanding that our knowledge, if it is true, if through it we actually conquer the real, be an assimilation of the subject and the object, and much more than a rebirth of the object through the subject, a birth of the subject in the object, and a vital identification with it."³²

The point of capital importance to realize, that is, is that, for Maritain, as much as for Bergson, knowledge is a vital identification which projects the knower into reality through *spirit*. For Maritain this projection occurs not without a subjective intermediary; it occurs in and through it - it occurs in and through *esse intentionale* (or, as the later scholastics would say, *esse essentiae*)³³ formed by the *intellectus agens*. For Maritain the knower cannot be in the known according to the knower's *esse naturae*, nor can the known be in the knower according to the known's *esse naturae*. To avoid absurdity Maritain thinks it is necessary to admit another form of existence - *esse intentionale* or, as he says the scholastics frequently call it, *esse spirituale*.³⁴

By means of this *esse* the thing exists in the soul by an *esse* other than the thing's and the soul becomes the thing by an *esse* other than the soul's. The soul and the thing meet in the *esse intentionale* of the *species impressa*, which union is nothing other than the marriage of the knower and the known in the spiritual existence of the concept. Maritain states:

...as arising in the soul as a fruit and expression of the intelligence already formed by the *species impressa*, already perfect and under the action of this created participation in the intellectual power of God, of that center of immateriality perpetually in act, the highest point of spiritual tension naturally present in us, which should be called the active intellect (*intellectus agens*) where the intellect which knows derives all its formative energy, this quality, this modification of the soul which is the concept has (like all the objectifying forms) the privilege of transcending the function of entitative information exercised by it, and of being present in the faculty *like a spirit*. It is from the intelligence itself, from the intelligence in living act, that it holds this privilege, as though the intelligence gathered all its own spirituality into this one active point there to bring it to a maximum. Thus the concept is in the intelligence not only entitatively or as formative form, but also as a spiritual form not absorbed in the actuation of a subject in order to constitute with it a *tertium quid*, but on the contrary as terminating the intellect *per modum intentionale* and in the line of knowledge, in the very degree to which it expresses and volatilises the object.³⁵

Thus, for Maritain, the objects of intellectual knowledge are objects abstracted from actual existence. In themselves they hold only a possible being. Actual being is consequently not known to the intellect in simple apprehension except as conceived *per modum quidditatis*.³⁶ For Maritain "this apprehension of being is absolutely primary and is implied in all our other intellectual apprehensions."³⁷ Nevertheless, this is not enough. The intellect is not content with this sort of apprehension. Hence it projects into existence through *esse spirituale*, and it is only in this projection that, for Maritain, the rightful function of judgment becomes intelligible.³⁸

While Maritain's way of speaking might sound to some more Bergsonian or Augustinian than Thomistic, nonetheless, the reality of *esse spirituale* is of such importance to him that he thinks it is because they refuse to grant real being to possible being that modern thinkers such as Descartes become trapped within their own minds.³⁹ For Maritain the key

to avoiding the egocentric predicament of modern philosophy is to recognize that extra-mental existence includes not only the spatially external existence of actual beings but also the rightful necessities inherent in essences independent of actual cognition. He says:

It is essential to add that in speaking of extra-mental existence I am not only thinking of actual existence but also and first of all of possible existence, for our intellect, in the simple act of apprehension abstracts from existence in act, and in its judgments does not only judge of what exists, but also of what might or might not exist, and of the rightful necessities inherent in essences, so that it is first of all with regard to the *possibly real* that it 'justifies itself' or, better, confirms itself or makes explicit to itself reflexively the value of intellectual knowledge, whence the critique of knowledge must primarily proceed. It is because of their misunderstanding of this fundamental point, because they confound possibly real being with rational being and only recognize the actual as real, that the noetics of so many modern writers go astray from the outset.⁴⁰

That is, it is because they fail to distinguish the *esse* of the known from the *esse* of the *cogitans* that, in Maritain's view, modern noetics are failures. Hence, for Maritain, it is not actual existence which is the point of departure of intellectual knowledge; it is possible existence - possible existence loaded with *esse spirituale*. How Thomistic this view is we will leave for our readers to decide for themselves. As for us, it looks remarkably similar to the spirit of inverted Bergsonianism being scrupulously relocated and corrected within the wisdom of John of St. Thomas. Indeed, this seems to us to be a fitting way to describe the essence of Maritain's thought as a whole.

NOTES

1. Jacques Maritain. *Bergsonian Philosophy and Thomism*, transl. Mabelle L. Andison and J. Gordon Andison (New York, 1955) p. 158.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 123-124 and pp. 155-156.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, p. 294.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 39, footnote 3.
8. Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, transl. Galantiere and Gerald B. Phelan (New York, 1948) p. 47.
9. Maritain, *Bergsonian Philosophy and Thomism*, p. 126.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 294.
11. By using "inverted" I imply that Maritainianism is not a simple relocation of Bergson's views into later scholastic Thomism. Maritainianism is a synthesis which takes place in two stages. First, Maritain to some extent disagrees with and negates a view held by Bergson. Second, he relocates the corrected view (the view of the Bergson of intention, had Bergson known better) into its proper place within later scholastic Thomism.
12. Maritain, *Bergsonian Philosophy and Thomism*, pp. 119-203.
13. *Ibid.*, pp.21-22.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 155.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 29, footnote 3.
16. *Ibid.*, pp.108-109.
17. *Ibid.*, p.126.
18. Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, transl. Bernard Wall and Margot R. Adamson (New York, 1938) p. 35 and p. 45.
19. Jacques Maritain, *An Introduction to Philosophy* (New York, 1959) p. 199.
20. Maritain, *Bergsonian Philosophy and Thomism*, p. 292.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, pp. 144-155.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 149, footnote 2.
25. Maritain, *Bergsonian Philosophy and Thomism*, p. 32.
26. Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, p. 157.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 104 and p. 157.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 135.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 136.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 137.
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 117-119. See especially p. 119, footnote 1.

32. Maritain, *Bergsonian Philosophy and Thomism*, pp. 155-156.
33. For an introduction to the doctrine of *esse essentiae* in later scholasticism, see Etienne Gilson's *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto, 1952) pp. 74-107.
34. Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, p. 139. About *esse spirituale* Maritain states: "I hold that a great field of interest lies open for philosophers in the study of the part it plays even in the world of physics, which is doubtless the cause of that form of universal animation by which movement brings to bodies more than they are in themselves, and colours all nature with a semblance of life and feeling." (To us this sounds more like the World Soul of neo-Platonism than the metaphysics of St. Thomas!) On the same page (footnote 1) Maritain adds: "The movement of projectiles, which caused so much difficulty for the ancients, could be perhaps explained by the fact that, at the first instant of movement and because of it, the qualitative state which exists in the agent and is the immediate cause of the movement (speaking in ontological terms; it is by design that I do not use the terms which belong to the vocabulary of mechanics) passes *secundum esse intentionale* into the mobile object." From this standpoint it would be possible to hold the Galilean principle of inertia viable not only from the point of view of physico-mathematical science (at least, according to the mechanics of Einstein, for a space ideally supposed which would be totally devoid of curvature), but also from that of the philosophy of nature."
35. *Ibid.*, pp.152-153.
36. *Ibid.*, pp. 110-111, and p. 119, footnote 1.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
40. *Ibid.*, pp. 111-112.