

PART TWO

EXISTENCE AND THE EXISTENT

D. The Existent

THE FOUNDATIONS OF MARITAIN'S NOTION OF THE ARTIST'S "SELF"

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"The difference between the right word
and the almost-right word is the
difference between the lightning and
the lightning-bug." Mark Twain

Introduction

For disciples of Maritain's aesthetics, his definition of Poetry¹ in the opening of *Intuition in Art and Poetry* is particularly familiar: Poetry, he says, is the "intercommunication between the inner being of things and the inner being of the human Self"²

Although undoubtedly obscure for philosophers from some philosophical traditions, this definition always appealed to me as a Thomist philosopher, and I felt reasonable confidence about my ability to understand what Maritain was saying. The attempt to explain this definition to a non-Thomist interlocutor presented an unanticipated challenge, however, especially when our discussion about the "intercommunication of the inner being" necessarily led us to the metaphysical principles underlying this idea ... principles like the analogy of being and the Thomistic notion of the human person.

After some preliminary success at understanding each other and the specific jargon of Thomistic vocabulary, my colleague unwittingly went straight for the linguistic jugular when he inquired about Maritain's awkward use of the term "Self." Why had the definition not been written: "... and the inner being of the human *Person*..."? Surely, my friend suggested, that is what Maritain had in mind, and that word-choice would have decreased the text's esoteric tone and increased reader comprehensibility.

My initial inclination was to agree. Interchanging "Person" and "Self" certainly appeared sufficiently appropriate to Maritain's meaning, and I thought at first that the discrepancy could be traced to a translator's preference. Closer investigation, however, revealed two things to the

contrary. First, since *Creative Intuition* was initially published in English, the existing word-choice could not be explained away by attributing it to a translator's decision. Secondly, since *Creative Intuition* itself contains no detailed discussion of either of the terms "Person" or "Self," it was safe to assume that Maritain presupposed a certain measure of background-understanding on the part of his readers. Unfortunately, regardless of the truth or falsity of this presupposition, it still leaves the present problem unaffected and unresolved. Are the terms "Person" and "Self" interchangeable, or was there instead serious purpose in Maritain's mind when he selected the term "Self", a choice which he reiterates several pages later:

I need to designate both the singularity and the infinite depths of this flesh-and-blood and spiritual existent, the artist; and I have only an abstract word: the Self.³

Far from being an exercise in intellectual or philosophical trivia and minutiae, the investigation and subsequent resolution of this problem -- what are the foundations of Maritain's notion of the "Self" such that he would prefer to use this term in reference to the artist's personhood? -- actually provided deepened insight into the "infinite depths" which Maritain undoubtedly desired to convey to his readers through the intentional selection of that solitary and "abstract" word: the "Self."

Maritain's Notion of the "Self"

As mentioned, *Creative Intuition* contains no detailed discussion of either "Person" or "Self." To understand Maritain's mind on this subject, and to appreciate the background or foundation concerning these terms that he presumes of the readers of *Creative Intuition*, we must turn to two earlier works which are especially germane. For a discussion of "Person," the early sections of Maritain's book *The Person and the Common Good* are quite helpful; the most accessible and productive source for understanding the foundations of his notion of "Self" is Maritain's small but seminal work, *Existence and the Existent*.

In his essay entitled simply "The Existent," Maritain not only discusses the terms "Self" and "subjectivity," but correctly initiates his treatment of these ideas within the broader context of the "subject" (or *suppositum*) and the distinction between existence and subsistence. This latter precision is a metaphysically essential distinction, though it is one that is frequently obscured or over-looked in much modern and contemporary philosophy. "Existence" is a term which refers to anything at all that may be said "to be" -- it encompasses the entire analogical range of the verb "is" and, as such, designates not only material and spiritual beings (i.e., substances, subjects, or supposits) but accidental, imaginary, and purely rational or logical beings as well.

While it is true that all subsisting beings exist, the opposite is not true. Thus, subsistence may be understood to refer to a special class of existing beings, namely those which have their "to be" or existence in and of themselves. The word "substance" is perhaps the most frequent term used to designate these subsisting beings. It is the most common translation for what Aristotle termed *ousia* and Aquinas termed *suppositum*; in *Existence and the Existent*, Maritain employs the term "subject."

Having their being (their "to be") in themselves, these suppositis or subjects are substantially composed of essence (*essentia*) and an act of existing (*esse*), according to traditional Thomistic vocabulary. Maritain says:

Essence is *that which* a thing is; suppositum is *that which* has an essence, *that which* exercises existence and action -- *actiones sunt suppositorum* -- *that which* subsists.⁴

Esse is traditionally understood as that act of existing by virtue of which a possible or conceivable essence is made actual in the concrete or existential order; *essentia* is traditionally understood as the whatness or the essence of a particular substance -- it is that by virtue of which a thing is *what* it is without accidental qualification. But Maritain does not stop at any reiteration of these traditional metaphysical principles. He goes on to say:

God does not create essences to which He can be imagined as giving a last rub of the sandpaper of subsistence before sending them forth into existence! God creates existent subjects or supposita which subsist in the individual nature that constitutes them and which receive from the creative influx their nature as well as their subsistence, their existence, and their activity. Each of them possesses an essence and pours itself out in action. Each is, for us, in its individual existing reality, an inexhaustible well of knowability. We shall never know everything there is to know about the tiniest blade of grass or the least ripple in a stream. In the world of existence there are only subjects or supposita, and that which emanates from them into being.⁵

In addition to providing us with a foundation of his notion of "Self," this passage helps us to understand Maritain's notion of "Things." In *Creative Intuition*, Maritain writes:

I need to designate the secretive depths and implacable advance of that infinite host of beings ... of that world, that undecipherable Other -- with which Man the artist is faced; and I have no word for that except the poorest and tritest word of the human language; I shall say: the things of the world, the *Things*.⁶

But, unique within this created universe of an unfathomable, "infinite host of beings" and subjects, the human person stands in a pre-eminent position. For just as vegetative animate life rises above the inanimate, and sentient animal life is distinguished from the solely vegetative, in a like manner the supreme immanence of human intellectual life transcends the limitations of the non-human animals. Distinguished by the unique kinds of operations proper to humans (intellectual thought, the exercise of free will and selfless love), we come to understand why Maritain claims that "the *suppositum* becomes *persona*,"⁷ why the distinctively human receives its own name.

From this brief discussion, it is possible to present two contrasting synopses. The preliminary situation from the perspective of metaphysics may be expressed as follows: There is a created universe filled with subjects (and their operations, activities, relations), all of which are infinite sources of intelligibility, and some of which, by virtue of their unique nature, are in a potential knowing/loving relationship with that universe. These knowers/lovers have their own name ... they are persons.

By contrast, the preliminary situation from the perspective of aesthetics/epistemology, building upon the previous metaphysical foundation, may be described as follows: These knowing/loving persons, since they participate in the likeness of the Creator, are also makers or creators, with one significant difference. The Divine Artist is an "unformed fashioner" creating out of the unlimited abundance of His own Being, while the human artist is a "formed fashioner" creating out of the limited resource of his or her own being. To this point in the aesthetic/epistemological analysis, the term "Person" is still quite sufficient; no real need for any preference for the term "Self" is even suggested.

It is only when Maritain grapples with the question of the unique knowledge proper to the true "Poet," with the way in which the artist's knowledge is received or "formed" as the knower becomes one with the known -- the artist "divines" the inexhaustible intelligibility of Things -- that he finds the traditional logical categories used in the explanation of conceptual knowledge to be inadequate. It is within this context of the discussion of knowledge (at first, in general, and then subsequently, of the artist in particular) that the term "Self" is appropriately introduced. In

speaking of the ordinary knowledge that we have of the created universe, of subjects, Maritain says:

We know those subjects, we shall never get through knowing them. We do not know them as subjects, we know them by objectivising them, by achieving objective insights of them and making them our objects; for the object is nothing other than something of the subject transferred into the state of immaterial existence of intellection in act. We know subjects not as subjects, but as objects⁸

This passage describes the basic nature of our knowing relationship to other subjects by means of conceptual knowledge. But the knowledge that the artist has of the world is different. Certainly the artist knows by means of concepts and developed skill, but when it comes to the discussion of the Poetry of the artist's work, that "secret life of each and all the arts,"⁹ the categories that explain our ordinary, conceptual-knowledge relationship to the world break down.

Recognizing that human experience in general and artistic experience in particular admits of a mode of knowing that is non- conceptual and experiential, yet obscure and incapable of giving an account of itself, Maritain develops, over a period of some thirty-three years,¹⁰ his idea of "Poetic Knowledge." And although this mode of knowledge is difficult to explain -- indeed, it is a mode of knowing that is as obscure to the artist as his or her own subjectivity is -- Maritain finds that within this context the language of the duality between subjectivity (or Self) and objectivity (or object) is still eminently useful.

The contrast between the epistemology of philosophy and science, and artistic creativity is clear. In the former, we know the subjects of the world by objectivising them, by knowing them as objects, never as subjects. In artistic or poetic intuition, however, what is grasped is properly speaking not an "object" of knowledge at all since things are objectivised insofar as they are expressed in concepts, and there are no concepts in Poetic Knowledge proper.

... poetic intuition is not directed toward essences, for essences are disengaged from concrete reality in a concept, a universal idea, and scrutinized by means of reasoning; they are an object for speculative knowledge, they are not the thing grasped by poetic intuition.¹¹

It is in *Existence and The Existent* that we find Maritain expressing those ideas which will reach maturity in *Creative Intuition*. He does this

appropriately within the context of the discussion of the knowledge of subjectivity as subjectivity. Only in relation to myself do I have an obscure intuition of my own subjectivity that is not limited or confined by the objectivising activity of the intellect. "I know myself as subject by consciousness and reflexivity, but my substance is obscure to me,"¹² Maritain writes, affirming the intuitive, non-conceptual obscurity that characterizes this mode of knowledge.

Subjectivity *as subjectivity* is inconceptualisable; it is an unknowable abyss. It is unknowable by the mode of notion, concept, or representation, or by any mode of any science whatsoever¹³

This knowledge of subjectivity as subjectivity can be grasped in either of three types of connatural knowledge, which Maritain enumerates as practical knowledge in moral judgments, poetic knowledge, and mystical knowledge. In the definition of poetic knowledge below, we can observe Maritain's forecast of the idea of the "inner being of the human Self," despite the fact that the word subjectivity (rather than Self) appears. Poetic Knowledge is a knowledge

... in which subjectivity and the things of this world are known together in creative intuition-emotion and are revealed and expressed together, not in a word or concept but in a created work.¹⁴

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, we may conclude that the term "Person" is the more suitable metaphysical term designating the nature of a particular type of being in a universe of other beings or subjects. "Self," on the other hand, may be said to be the more appropriate epistemological term since it conveys the epistemic polarity between subjectivity and objectivity, between the knowing Self and the universe of beings which become objects for me when they are represented in a philosophical-or scientific-knowledge-relation by means of concepts. Although it is instructive to note that the term "Self" is the preferred language for discussions about knowledge since it conveys the epistemological polarity just indicated, it is also important to recall that Maritain was particularly eager to show that this knowledge-by-means-of-concepts is precisely the type of knowledge that does not operate directly in the poetic knowledge of the artist. In Poetry, the artist does not know the world by objectivising it.

This reservation, however, does not lessen the sustained preference for using the term "Self" as desirable for our artistic or aesthetic vocabulary about Poetry. For just as the knowledge of "Subjectivity as Subjectivity" in

Maritain's discussion transcends the conceptual, though it is still knowledge, so too does Poetic Knowledge retain its claim as a *bona fide* human knowledge which occasions a union of the knower and the known while also transcending the conceptual order. In the creative expression of poetic knowledge that characterizes the artist's work, it is the Self and the Things of the world that are know together -- the "formed" content of the artist's creative knowledge is precisely his or her own subjectivity resounding together with the "inner being of Things." The relation of the artist's Self to the world is one of an infinite openness open to the infinite. To be sure, the penetration of reality's secrets -- that intercommunication of inner being -- is not something assured or necessarily given to all; but to those who have "eyes" and the gift of poetic intuition, all becomes light and brilliance.

For the content of poetic intuition is both the reality of the things of the world and the subjectivity of the poet, both obscurely conveyed through an intentional or spiritualized emotion. The soul [Self] is known in the experience of the world and the world is known in the experience of the soul [Self], through a knowledge which does not know itself.¹⁵

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Notes

1. Since Maritain assigned "Poetry" a special meaning that goes beyond the art of writing verse, this paper will distinguish these two senses as follows: upper case for Maritain's sense, lower case for the verse-writing sense. The same method will also be employed concerning the term "Self" and "Things."
2. J. Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York, 1953) p. 3.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
4. J. Maritain, *Existence and The Existent*, trans. L. Galaniere and G. Phelan (New York, 1984) p. 62.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 65-67.
6. *Creative Intuition*, p. 10.
7. *Existence and The Existent*, p. 68.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
9. *Creative Intuition*, p. 3.
10. From 1920 and the publication of *Art and Scholasticism* to 1953 and the publication of *Creative Intuition*.
11. *Creative Intuition*, pp. 125-126.
12. *Existence and The Existent*, pp. 68-69.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
15. *Creative Intuition*, p. 124. The words in brackets have been added for clarity and emphasis.