

APPENDICES

THE CONTEMPORANEITY OF MARITAIN'S *EXISTENCE AND THE EXISTENT*

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I wish to emphasize but one point -- Maritain was truly a twentieth century philosopher. As one conference title expressed it, he as "A Philosopher for Our Time."

I know such titles and expressions are over-used and tired, but they could not have become so if they lacked an important application. In Maritain's case they enjoy a preeminent applicability. I can think of no other philosopher who took more seriously the philosopher's call to give witness to society. It is one thing for a philosopher to speak out *as a philosopher who is speaking out* and quite another for a philosopher to speak out *as a philosopher who is speaking out philosophically*.

There are many intellectuals who step forward to pronounce publically on some current social event or political policy, and in doing so they might even be regarded as representing the intellectual community. But frequently their pronouncements bear little or no connection with their theories. They speak out merely as "concerned" or "outraged" members of the intelligentsia.

Intellectuals feel free to act this way because in their own eyes and those of society their vocation entitles them to do so. But when they simply "speak out," they are living on past glories. For the authority of the intellectual to speak out found its warrant in the connection between philosophical truth and daily life. What we have nowadays, all too frequently, are public pronouncements from members of the intelligentsia which are neither philosophical nor intellectual but ideological. (The inevitability of the replacement of philosophy by ideology has its source in relativism which never enjoys more than a brief fashionability in the aftermath of despair in the intellect's capacity to know truth. Human beings will insist upon holding some "truths" sacred even if they cannot rationally validate them.)

In contrast, Maritain was a philosopher who spoke out philosophically while steadfastly refusing to lend his support, as philosopher, to any political group or ideology. A striking feature of his philosophical witness was its conspicuous metaphysical and epistemological origins. Maritain was first

and foremost a metaphysician, a metaphysician who saw the ground and application of his metaphysical theorizing in contemporary events and institutions.

As an example consider Maritain's metaphysical notion of the subject. This notion is at the very center of *Existence and the Existent*: the metaphysical and epistemological argumentation in Chapter One on behalf of the reality of essence and the primacy of the act of existing leads to the conclusion in Chapter Three that the existent is a *subject*, which is to say, a source of activity. On the level of the person, this source is transformed into a source of free, self-perfecting activity.

The socio-political ramifications of this notion immediately recommend themselves. Here we have a rationally justifiable foundation for the inherent, preeminent dignity and rights of the human person in society. I was introduced to Maritain's theory of subsistence -- which, as you know, is the crucial presupposition of his notion of the subject -- when upon reading his *The Person and the Common Good*, I came across the following sentence: "Personality is the subsistence of the spiritual soul communicated to the human composite." For some time before that moment, I had been searching for an answer to the question, "What is it about the human person that justifies his claim to inalienable rights?" The context in which the above sentence appeared suggested to me that an investigation of Maritain's writings on subsistence would reward me with the answer. I was not disappointed. His notion of subsistence furnishes the metaphysical account of the personhood of the human subject which rationally justifies his claim in *The Rights of Man and the Natural Law* that rights are due man by virtue of what he is *by nature*.

What has this to do with Maritain as "a twentieth century philosopher"? The answer lies within his public witness as a metaphysician in general and in his notion of the subject in particular. Indeed, these two considerations account for the title of this address, "The Contemporaneity of Maritain's *Existence and the Existent*."

Ours is an age of mass societies; the megapolis stands as a twentieth century phenomenon. How much has been written in the past half-century, on the one hand, about the eclipse of the self, his freedom and responsibility, in modern mass society and, on the other hand, about the need to preserve the human species! I say "on the one hand. . . and on the other" because these respective projects frequently collide with each other. The reason for the collision may be traced to a lack of the metaphysical wherewithal needed to reconcile the uniqueness and freedom of the human person with the standardization required by the general welfare of society.

Defenses of the primacy of the person have incompatible with the good of society, as laissez-faire individualist and anarchist theories demonstrated in the nineteenth century while defenses of the primacy of the human species and society have proved incompatible with the good of the person,

as collectivists theories demonstrate in the present century. The attempts of German philosophy to reconcile the two, with a fusion of German romanticism and Hegelianism, in various forms of the concrete universal, have proved no more successful, owing to the pantheistic implications of claiming that the particular concretely expresses the universal. Somehow the latter manages to swallow the former. Consider, for example, Bernard Bosanquet's *Philosophical Theory of the State*, wherein that British admirer of Hegel writes that when the law of the state requires me to act or refrain from acting in specific ways, my freedom is not thereby diminished, for I am thereby really obeying myself since I am a particularization of the state!

What Maritain has accomplished with his elucidation of the metaphysical notion of the subject, however, is a rational justification of the dignity and rights traditionally ascribed to the human person that is at the same time compatible with the notion of him as a social being. I noted at the outset that Maritain prepared the ground for the notion of the subject by defending the reality of essence and the primacy of the act of existing. Permit me to amplify that observation.

Existence and the Existent contains emphatic warnings against the insinuation of Platonism and rationalism into Thomistic metaphysics. Maritain's point in issuing the warnings centers in the question "What exists?" His answer is that "things, subjects, existents" are what exists, not reified essences. If I may put it thus: what exists are things and things are existents, which is to say, subjects or sources of activity. The universe, Maritain accordingly observes, is entirely populated by subjects.

Now the pertinent feature of Maritain's notion of the subject unfolds in his tripartite argument. First, he explodes the Sartrean claim that the primacy of existence necessitates the denial of the reality of essence: not only do finite existents have essences, for in their finitude they exist as *this* and *that*, a specificity which means that existents are composed of the potency of essence and the reality of existence; but the vaunted freedom which Sartre would defend by denying essence would be impossible. An act springing from such an agent would amount to nothing more than a determined spontaneity, much the same as a twitch of the facial muscles or some other reflex action. Freedom of the will requires necessitation to a good which, in turn, requires the agent's formal organization towards an end. Essence confers this formal organization.

Second, in his affirmation of the primacy of existence, Maritain calls attention to the "act of all acts" which is existence. Because only a subject can exercise an act, the existent enjoys a degree of uniqueness. I say "a degree of uniqueness" since the extent of an existent's uniqueness is determined by its rank in the hierarchy of being. As Thomas Aquinas observed, "the higher a nature, the more intimate to that nature is the activity that flows from it." Thus as a unique center of conscious, autonomous

being, the human person enjoys the uniqueness possessed only by a self. In material nature, man stands alone as a truly unique subject.

Third, the consequence of this notion of the subject unmasks the Platonic and rationalist error regarding essence. Universality cannot be the inevitable quality of essence; it is only so when it inhabits the intellect as an intentional being, for then it has been de-individualized by abstraction. Essence in itself is neither universal nor particular, but is either the one or the other depending on the conditions of its existence: as it exists in things, i.e., subjects, it is particular.

The subject is accordingly a unique composition of essence and existence. Recall the remarkable second chapter in *Existence and the Existent* where, anticipating the discussion of the subject's ontological foundation conferred by the mode of subsistence, Maritain investigates the meaning of the moral life of the human subject: if the moral law is a universal law, the human subject constitutes a unique embodiment of that law. By choosing to live by the law, he appropriates it to his own unique selfhood.

How does the Maritainian notion of the subject speak to the twentieth century? The answer is that it rationally grounds, in the evidence of experience, the universality and uniqueness of man. Universal because each human subject embodies what is common to all men and women at all times and in all places. Unique because existential embodiment proportions essence to the singular act of existing of the subject. This ontology furnishes the rationale for reconciling the standardization of man required by the general welfare of political society with his need to find fulfillment in the actualization of the potentials inherent in the uniqueness of the existent that he is. In exercising his unique act of existing, he is, to be sure, specified in that exercise by what he shares in common with all human beings, the essence *man*. But his singular privilege in the spectrum of material being is to use his reason and free choice to actualize unique, and hitherto unprecedented, embodiments of that essence.

How often do we read in the pages of Maritain's books defenses of the dignity of the human person -- whether the topic of discussion be education, politics, economics, morals, or spirituality -- which either explicitly or implicitly derive their inspiration from the conception of the human person as *subject*! Consider, for example, *Freedom in the Modern World*, *The Person and the Common Good*, *Education at the Crossroads*, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, and *Liturgy and Contemplation*.

The future of democratic society and, indeed, of Western civilization depends on the reconciliation of the general welfare with personal autonomy and fulfillment. The twentieth century has provided us with a dramatic, and often absurd, theatre of challenges and threats both to the person and the common good. We cannot tell what the future holds. But the path to the survival, let alone the progress, of these values requires a philosophical

vision of man. I am persuaded that the foundation for such a vision has been set forth by Maritain and nowhere has he done this more incisively and foundationally than in *Existence and the Existent*.

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