

Knowing Our Knowings

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In a previous paper, “The Elements of Discord: The *Sine Qua Non* of Education” I argued that the transcendentals were necessary principles for the communication of any theory from one person to another.¹ To be understood, we must be coherent (logical), affirm some absolute truth, goodness, and beauty. No one can successfully communicate a theory that is incoherent, values nothing, and holds nothing as true. If these transcendental properties are true of papers and theories, then they are also true of the knowers who form them. Theories and papers do not come out of thin air—they come from concrete acts of human knowing. In this paper, I will explore the different types of knowing associated with each of the transcendentals. I will further argue that the forms of knowledge associated with the true, the good, and the beautiful, are essentially different from each other, and how, according to Maritain, even truth is different for each one. I believe that if we can appreciate the differences between each of these kinds of human knowing, then we can prevent a multitude of serious but common errors and can come to appreciate the philosophies of others better. Maritain once remarked that, “everywhere I see truths made captive. . . . Our business is to find the positive in all things; to use what is true, less to strike than to cure.”² It is in this Maritainian spirit of “recovery” that I shall explore the various forms of knowing and the philosophers who exemplified them.

One way to unlock the treasures of many of the great philosophers that may often seem to undermine and contradict each other is by doing what I would like to call a transcendental analysis of them. This means finding out what transcendental their philosophy is principally drawing from, principally “riding” on, principally following, and this will tell one a lot about their

¹ In *The Common Things: Essays on Thomism and Education*, ed. Daniel McInerney (Washington, D.C.: American Maritain Association / The Catholic University of America Press, 1999), pp. 92-101.

² Maritain, *Art and Faith: Letters Between Jacques Maritain and Jean Cocteau*, trans. John Coleman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948).

philosophy including the blind spots it has and will have. Upon realizing this, one can appreciate the transcendental appropriation of that philosophy while not having to accept everything in it as a whole, or to criticize it for not “seeing” everything. For example, one could look at the philosophies of Plato, Aristotle and Nietzsche and see that each philosophy has its unique depth perception of the universe of being and yet, at the same time, has blind spots towards the value of other transcendental perceptions.

The notion of a “blind spot” first came to my attention in the work entitled *A View From Nowhere*.³ In this work, the contemporary analytical philosopher Thomas Nagel argues that humans have two viewpoints: subjective and objective. He argues that each viewpoint cannot see the value of the other. According to Nagel:

The problem of bringing together subjective and objective views of the world can be approached from either direction. If one starts from the subjective side, the problem is the traditional one of skepticism, idealism, or solipsism. How, given my personal experiential perspective, can I form a conception of the world as it is independent of my perception of it? ...If on the other hand, one starts from the objective side, the problem is how to accommodate, in a world that simply exists and has no perspectival center, any of the following things: (a) oneself; (b) one’s point of view; (c) the point of view of other selves....⁴

As one can see then, from the scientific and objective point of view there is no “self,” no interests, or values; and from a merely scientific vantage point, one can see exactly what Nagel is talking about. If one starts with the viewpoint of objective science and treats as a metaphysic, he may never escape it. This was the case with Bertrand Russell who knew what a world seen as a function of science meant. He wrote in a “A Free Man’s Worship” that:

Such, in outline, but even more purposeless, more void of meaning, is the world which science presents for our belief.... That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end that they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms... only of the firm foundation of unyielding despair can the soul’s habitation henceforth be safely built.⁵

Now scientific knowledge needs no apology, but man does need other forms of knowledge, even ones opposed to the methods of science to give him the whole truth about life. Maritain was acutely aware of the differences

³ Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵ Bertrand Russell, “A Free Man’s Worship” in *Why I am Not a Christian* (New York: Touchstone, 1957), pp. 106-07.

of the various forms of knowledge. He was also acutely aware of how they did not see eye to eye. As we examine the kinds of knowledge that pertain to each of the transcendentals we see what a difference, the differences actually make. While there may be many different kinds of knowledge within the human being, we will focus upon three that Maritain himself focused on: the theoretical, the practical and knowledge by connaturality. These kinds of knowledge focus upon the true, the good, and the beautiful respectively. Now since being is one, good, true, and beautiful we may think that these kinds of knowledge are all one, and that one can mix and match as one pleases, but Maritain disagrees. Unless one is God, the transcendentals do not appear united. Similarly, the good is not necessarily the true, and vice-versa.⁶ The implications are enormous. While operating in the world, the different faculties of man grasp being differently. Our “will... does not of itself tend to the true, but solely and jealously to the good of man.”⁷ The intellect by itself desires the truth, which of itself does not inspire but “only illumines.”⁸ In fact, nothing with a drive toward the infinite—as is the human aspiration for truth or for goodness—is in accord with any other similar drive.⁹ Furthermore, he would claim that within the human being there are many knowledge-based aspirations towards the infinite and that they can be even hostile to each other. He writes in the *Situation of Poetry*:

The fact is that all these energies, insofar as they pertain to the transcendental universe, aspire like poetry to surpass their nature and to infinitise themselves.... Art, poetry, metaphysics, prayer, contemplation, each one is wounded, struck traitorously in the best of itself, and that is the very condition of its living. Man unites them by force.¹⁰

We see the resulting conflict being played out in those who, according to Maritain, in the “spirit of Luther, Rousseau, or Tolstoy defend the order of

⁶ “Wherefore beauty, truth, goodness (especially when it is no longer a question of metaphysical or transcendental good itself, but of moral good) command distinct spheres of human activity, of which it would be foolish to deny *a priori* the possible conflict, on the pretext that the transcendentals are indissolubly bound to one another.” Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974), p. 174n68.

⁷ *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁹ Jacques Maritain, “Concerning Poetic Knowledge” in Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, *The Situation of Poetry: Four Essays on the Relations Between Poetry, Mysticism, Magic, and Knowledge*, trans. Marshall Suther, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955; reprint, New York: Kraus Reprint, 1968) p. 56.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

the moral good,”¹¹ while others like Aristotle¹² and Aquinas defend the order of truth. Here are two families that hardly understand each other—here as elsewhere, “the prudent one dreads the contemplative and distrusts him.”¹³

Furthermore, even the notion of truth is different for the three kinds of knowledge. Truth for speculative thinking is the adequation or conformity of the intellect to being. Truth for practical knowledge is the conformity of the intellect with the straight appetite; and truth for knowledge by connaturality, associated with poetry, is the conformity of the mind with being but being *as grasped through emotion*.¹⁴ No wonder there are blind spots. If truth is not the same, it follows that to make all of these viewpoints logically coherent would be extremely difficult, if not an impossible, task!

Specifically with regard to the distinction between speculative and practical thinking Maritain illustrates the differences well in his *Peasant of the Garonne*. He has a striking passage concerning the Christian’s love-hate relationship with the world. Now we all know about the saint who might talk about hating the world, about the evils of the flesh, and yet we also know of the theologian who claims that both are actually good. Are they contradicting each other? Maritain says no; they are simply speaking different languages. He writes:

[Reality] does not appear in the same light in both cases. The theologian declares that grace perfects nature and does not destroy it; the saint declares that grace requires us to make nature die to itself. They are both telling the truth. But it would be a shame to reverse their languages by making use in the speculative order, formulas which are true for the practical order, and vice versa.... Let us think of the “contempt for creatures” professed by the saints.... For the philosopher and the theologian it would mean: creatures are worth nothing *in themselves*; for the saint: they are worth nothing *for me*.... The saint sees in practice that creatures are nothing in comparison with the One to whom he has given his heart and of the End he has chosen.¹⁵

One can only imagine the innumerable other possible applications here. For example, might the relationship between faith and works in the letters of St.

¹¹ Jacques Maritain, “An Essay on Art” in *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 98.

¹² *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 33.

¹³ Jacques Maritain, “The Freedom of Song” in Jacques Maritain, *Art and Poetry*, trans. E. de P. Matthews, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1943), p. 103.

¹⁴ Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 236.

¹⁵ Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne: An Old Layman Questions Himself About the Present Time*, trans. Michael Cuddihy and Elizabeth Hughes (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), p. 44.

Paul and St. James be clarified? Might one be a practical exhortation and the other a speculative exposition of justification?

Another specific and telling difference is the one between the aesthetic and theoretical viewpoints. While I have dealt with this difference extensively in a previous article “Deconstruction and Artistic Creation: Maritain and the Bad Boys of Philosophy,”¹⁶ we can simplify it here. The theoretical viewpoint wants to use logic, concepts, abstractions, definitions, categories, to understand things discursively and apart from the sensible world, while the aesthetic viewpoint wants none of that, but wants to access the sensible world directly. Maritain writes in the “Frontiers of Poetry”:

The difference is an all-important one, and one that it would be harmful to disregard. Metaphysics snatches at the spiritual in an idea, by the most abstract intellection; poetry reaches it in the flesh, by the very point of the sense sharpened through intelligence. Metaphysics enjoys its possession only in the retreats of the eternal regions, while poetry finds its own at every crossroad in the wanderings of the contingent and the singular.¹⁷

The last relationship is between the aesthetic and the moral, and Maritain could not be clearer on this issue. Since the practical intellect from which the virtue of art operates differently from the speculative—as seen above—and since the virtue of art and prudence concern to very different goods, one the good of the moral agent and the other the good of the work-to-be-made, art does not concern morality or knowledge. We should not expect it to give an explicit moral lesson. If it does, the work of art suffers an impurity and serves a master beyond itself. It becomes polluted and a form of propaganda.¹⁸

Now whole philosophies may also exhibit the same tensions. We may begin our exploration with the transcendental of the Good. Thomas Aquinas called Socrates a moral philosopher, and that is most apt, for Socrates, as for his disciple Plato, all of reality is a function of morality. For both, reality is what exists after one has made sense of morality.¹⁹ Reality is what has to exist for morality to make sense. If morality does not make sense in a totally physical and changing world, then a new world must be hypothesized to account for it. And if morality is really about the most important aspects of

¹⁶ In *Postmodernism and Christian Philosophy*, ed. Roman T. Ciapolo (Washington, D.C.: American Maritain Association / The Catholic University of America Press, 1997), pp. 118-27.

¹⁷ Jacques Maritain, “The Frontiers of Poetry” in *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 128.

¹⁸ Jacques Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1960), pp. 72-3.

¹⁹ I am indebted here to the lectures on aesthetics given by Fr. Robert O’Connell at Fordham University, Bronx, New York.

our human nature—our soul—what is benefited by justice and corrupted by injustice—then this otherworldly world that provides the foundation for this, must be the most real. Then, of course, as this invisible world of forms becomes the center of reality, the “more real,” our physical world ends up relegated to the status of shadows on a cavern wall. On the one hand, the beauty of Platonism is the keen awareness of the special nature of morality and how strange that makes reality. On the other hand, Platonism’s blind spots are that it bypasses the “truth” of physical reality and that it cannot tolerate the beauty of embodied existence as expressed through the poets who “know” in an aesthetic way.

The first blind spot is the missing of truth of the material world. Platonism bypasses the body, senses, physical things, and their relationships with each other. All of physical reality goes through the meat grinder of reason alone in Book Five of the *Republic*. The reality of the family and all of its obligations, loyalties, and significances are lost. The truth about the body and the senses are given only lip service. The only purpose for the body, the senses, and the physical world seems to be to enable us to leave them behind. And, perhaps, Augustine, the neo-Platonist, has echoes of this problem as well. The truth of this reality becomes, in a sense, eviscerated, and we are left with shells of symbols.²⁰

The second blind spot is that Plato cannot see the value of aesthetic in itself. Those who fear art had their first great spokesman in Plato. He knows that art and poetry do not knock at the front door of reason to get into our souls, but instead, invite themselves right in and play with us. He, in the *Republic*, tells us that “Rhythm and harmony insinuate themselves into the innermost part of the soul and most vigorously lay hold of it”²¹ He forbids the craftsman to practice his art so that our youths will not be reared on images of vice, “... and while they are totally unaware of it, are putting together a big bad thing in their souls.”²² Homer’s lies are harmful to us who hear them, for if we are not careful, “we will be sympathetic with ourselves when we are bad.”²³ Art is powerfully penetrating, it tells lies, and may very likely wreck havoc on our souls. It all boils down to a central moral issue. We are to be good by being rational, but art is, for Plato, irrational. “The unexamined life is not worth living for a human being,” but the aesthetic experience of beauty occurs precisely when we seem to be not using reason or examining ourselves.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Plato, *Republic*, 401d

²² Ibid., 401c.

²³ Ibid., 391e.

In a similar vein, and in the contemporary philosophical era, Kierkegaard reincarnates Socrates and his transcendental preference. Here the good lies in following the commands of Christ and in salvation. In a striking passage from *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard tells us that true love has nothing to do with friendship or romance, for Christ commands us to love our neighbor, and this means we need always to choose to love our neighbor, who is simply anyone. To have a friend or romantic lover means to love out of passion and preference, and, therefore, out of self-interest. When we love out of self-interest we are selfish. As we can see, here again a philosopher has wandered into the moral tunnel and cannot get out. He cannot see his speculative blind spots. He cannot see that it is his human nature and the society of human natures whose interest and preference it is. But here, as in many of his works on Christianity such as *Concerning Unscientific Postscript* and *Philosophical Fragments*, he refuses to make the distinctions of a speculative thinker. He says as much:

Love to one's neighbor is therefore eternal equality in loving.... This needs no elaborate development. Equality is just this, not to make distinctions, and eternal equality is absolutely not to make the slightest distinction.... Christianity is in itself too profound, in its movements too serious, for dancing and skipping in such free-wheeling frivolity of talk about the higher, the highest, the supremely highest.²⁴

Now Aristotle's emphasis on the transcendental of the true, on the theoretical knowledge that is now emergent from its symbiotic relation with practical knowledge in Platonic philosophy, allows him to make distinctions and to glory in them. Not overzealous to be good or pious, Aristotle can reflect upon the physical realities in front of him. Self-love is not egoism or selfishness but rather an expression of an already constituted human nature, already given in experience, before the act of choosing. The preferential loves of friends and family are highly honored by Aristotle.

Aristotle, because he wanted to know the truth about things, understood the necessary reality of the body, senses, and the structures and patterns of things in the physical world. He did not argue that the way to know reality—the true—was to become good first. He did not insist that we have a conversion to fire and sun, but rather thought that to know goodness, one must first know what's true. It is only after I find out what is true about human nature that I can know how humans act well. What is human nature and how does it exist in this physical world? Only by answering these questions first can Aristotle remark about how human nature actually thrives. Ultimately, Aristotle knew that our

²⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love in Other Selves: Philosophers on Friendship* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett, 1991), pp. 245-46.

human natures thrived when we acknowledged our bodies, families, and friends, because that is the way we actually find our natures here in this world.

The blind spot for Aristotle was the loss of what might be called the vertical dimension of reality—he could not see the fullness of participation; he could not see any reality higher than an impersonal self-thinking-thought-god and this world. Ultimate human purposes—as seen in the Platonic Form of the Good are lost, our purpose is simply to thrive, to function well, but, alas, we will not function well for anyone or anything more than ourselves in society, and death has the last say.²⁵ The good is a function of human nature, not vice-versa.

Nietzsche thought that the aesthetic realm—which I correlate to the realm of beauty—was the realm that had the greatest penetration into reality. It was only as an aesthetic reality that the universe could be justified, says Nietzsche in the *Birth of Tragedy*. This is true because only the aesthetic dimension attains to existence. While Plato was interested in moral forms and Aristotle in ontological and theoretical forms, Nietzsche wanted to see inside, around, and between forms, for this was reality too; and often a too overlooked and undervalued reality. As he says of Socratic logic in the *Birth of Tragedy*:

The voice of the Socratic dream vision is the only sign of any misgivings about the limits of logic: Perhaps—thus he [Socrates] must have asked himself—what is not intelligible to me is not necessarily intelligent? Perhaps there is a realm of wisdom from which the logician is exiled? Perhaps art is even a necessary correlative of, and supplement for science?²⁶

Nietzsche wanted to go beyond a logical discussion of good and evil, of an objective text, of a conceptually organized knowledge of things. He perceived well and caused many to take care to notice, (along with his fellow existentialists, existential Thomists, some natural mystics, and Eastern philosophers)²⁷ that existence itself cannot be conceptually or logically accessed. This is a critical insight and an all-important one. It is through tragedy and literature that one probes the experienced world of contingent and individual beings, their freedom, their actions, motivations, relationships, contexts, interests, and sufferings. Nietzsche is right. A merely theoretical understanding of the world would miss these in its search for forms, universals, the necessary, the permanent, and the caused.

²⁵ There are, of course, discussions on immortality in *De Anima* III and *Nicomachean Ethics*, but they do not amount to a personal immortality.

²⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 93.

²⁷ I am here indebted to the work of W. Norris Clarke, S.J.

His blind spot is that while he is right about the unique perspective of the aesthetic and right about that fact that it opposes *in its operation* the theoretical and practical perspectives, he was wrong in insisting that if a perspective did not agree with his aesthetic perspective, it did not exist. Perhaps, Nietzsche, in spite of his hatred of system, was the one who was too systematic here, in wanting only the aesthetic view. Maybe he was the one who was exiled, exiled from the theoretical and practical. Now, Maritain wasn't so logical. Maritain did not insist that all human knowings be one system—of one type. He knew their hostile differences. And he urged us—in a very existential and aesthetic way to embrace all of them, even when they didn't match up.

Nietzsche forgot that his whole *Birth of Tragedy* rested upon key distinctions and was parasitic upon theoretical concepts and moral values. After all, it was good—really good for Nietzsche—that we should not miss certain aspects of existential reality. It was really important that we not be rationalists! And it was true, really true, that Socrates was a man who constructed the world through an inquiry into moral concepts. Nietzsche could not but help using a scaffold taken from fragments from the true and the good. It is from this vantage point from which he criticizes the Western Tradition.

Now if we are able to simply allow each philosopher to show us what he can in the line of his transcendental and know in advance that there is going to be problems, then we do not have to be so upset at Nietzsche's nihilism. He almost has to be a nihilist! For nihilism means that nothing exists and that means no forms exist; and that means that the poetic perspective does not see the forms "head on"—and that is true! Poetry, for Maritain, does not concern itself with the forms of things. We can see the existences and the beauty that Nietzsche is trying to protect from the cutting knives of rationalism; however, he too has gone into a tunnel, the tunnel of the aesthetic—the realm of the beautiful—and he cannot get out.

Plato cannot get of the moral tunnel he is in. For if we portray reality as a function of morality, then the natural forms of things which, of course, do not appear in our *a priori* moral concerns, will be missed. And sorely missed! But if we know that, in advance that they will, we can forgive Plato.

Aristotle has difficulty getting out of the speculative tunnel. And the "ought" of morality is never found by examining the true alone. What is his distinction between happiness and blessedness all about? How can one be "happy" when the last act of the play is a bloody one and then they throw dirt over your head?²⁸

²⁸ One of the famous Pascal *Penseés*.

However limited may be the viewpoints of philosophers, we must affirm the value of each transcendental appropriation of knowledge. Maritain once claimed that, in spite of the conflict, the human being must affirm all of these kinds of knowing. The trick is not to follow the logic of any particular knowledge to the extreme, but to embrace all of them. The trick is to see in stereo or triphonic! Is this hard? Maritain thought so and, in fact, he thought that Catholicism needed to come to the rescue here. He writes:

Truthfully I do not believe it is possible outside of Catholicism to reconcile in man, without diminishing or doing violence to them, the rights of morality and the claims of intellectuality, art or science.... How are the children of Adam to keep the balance?²⁹

Perhaps it is necessary here to bring in a notion of God as a transcendent source and goal of all of our knowings.

We have examined a number of viewpoints in this paper from the truths of sciences and metaphysics to practical knowledge to aesthetic knowledge. I believe that the failure to affirm any one transcendental will result in some form of ignorance. Something of reality will be lost. We need to beware of becoming imprisoned in and through the perspectives we now have. We are a race that desperately needs to search for the goodness & value in reality, to search for the truth about life, and to search for beauty. And in the recent Encyclical, *Fides et Ratio*, Pope John Paul II is clear about this. And we are a race that cannot do it alone. We need faith and God's "grace to perfect our natures." Perhaps this is one small reason why we need Jesus, the one who reflects the Trinity, and the one who calls Himself "the way, the truth, and the life."

²⁹ "An Essay on Art", p. 98.