

The Darkening of the Intellect: Four Ways of Sinning Against the Light

Donald DeMarco

At the beginning of his *magnus opus*, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, Jacques Maritain cites the rather pessimistic view of a Jesuit friend concerning man's reduced capacities for metaphysical thinking. According to this view, man, since the fall of Adam, has become so ill-suited for metaphysical thinking that the intellectual apprehension of being must be looked upon as a mystical gift, indeed, a supernatural gift awarded only to a few privileged persons. While Maritain himself regards this view as an evident example of "pious exaggeration," he nonetheless warns of certain methodological problems the metaphysician must solve and specific cultural temptations he must resist. But most of all, Maritain stresses the need for a virtuous disposition on the part of the metaphysician, as well as the need for a certain "spiritual light."¹

As an astute philosopher, Maritain knows that if the fundamental act of grasping being is something reserved for the privileged, then education, in its strictest and most elementary sense, is equally esoteric. Consequently, education, for the most part, would inevitably be rooted in idealistic principles, that is to say, in principles that do not spring from any contact with reality. By contrast, Maritain's philosophical realism, as well as his Christian optimism, strongly incline him to take a more positive view about the prospects of both metaphysics and education. He understands that metaphysical thinking, like moral virtue, although difficult to acquire, becomes

¹ Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. under the supervision of Gerald B. Phelan (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), p. 2. Hereafter cited as *DK*.

easy to exercise once acquired. With this distinction in mind, there is no need to read any pessimism in the following assessment of his concerning the status of metaphysics in the modern world:

Three centuries of empirio-mathematicism have so warped the intellect that it is no longer interested in anything but the invention of apparatus to capture phenomena—conceptual nets that give the mind a certain practical dominion over nature, coupled with a deceptive understanding of it: deceptive, indeed, because its thought is resolved, not in being, but in the sensible itself . . . thus has the modern intellect developed within this lower order of scientific demiurgy a kind of manifold and marvelously specialized touch as well as wonderful instincts for the chase. But, at the same time, it has wretchedly weakened and disarmed itself in the face of the proper objects of the intellect, which it has abjectly surrendered.²

Hope remains, nevertheless, for, as Maritain avers, the intellect has not been warped (nor can it be), in its nature. The root of the problem is not in the intellect itself, but in the cultivation of bad intellectual habits. Maritain makes the same point in his book on St. Thomas Aquinas: “The disease afflicting the modern world is above all a disease of the intellect.”³ Yet, it is not the kind of pathology that impairs the intellect’s essential structure. However radical the disease may be, as Maritain goes on to say, it “remains of the accidental order, of the order of operation, and cannot affect it in its essential condition.”⁴

Despite its magnitude, the problem—a “pathogenic upheaval” as Maritain calls it—remains essentially correctible.⁵ “Only let the intellect become conscious of the disease and it will immediately rouse itself against it.”⁶

For this disease to be overcome two things are needed: first, a proper disposition on the part of the subject, and second the presence of light. With regard to the former, courage and humility are needed: courage, “to face up to extramental realities, to lay hands on things, to judge about what is”; and humility, “to submit [the intellect] to be measured by things.”⁷ With regard to the latter, light is needed, that principle of manifestation, as St. Thomas calls it, which makes the intelligibility of things evident. The proper dispo-

² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³ Jacques Maritain, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. and revised Joseph W. Evans and Peter O’Reilly (New York: Meridian Books, 1960), p. 89. Hereafter cited as *STA*.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁵ *DK*, p. 72.

⁶ *STA*, p. 93.

⁷ *DK*, p. 108.

sition of the knower, and the capacity to be witness to the light and to realize what the light illuminates, as Maritain explains, are profoundly interwoven.

Humility is not a popular virtue in the modern world, whereas courage is greatly admired. Many believe that these two qualities are actually incompatible with each other. Humility, they fear, interferes with courage. In being willing to allow extramental reality to be the measure of truth, rather than oneself, one places severe limitations on individual creativity, and therefore negates the courage needed in order to be oneself. This presumed antagonism between humility and courage is epitomized in Nietzsche's heroic individualism: "Love yourself through grace," he writes, "then you are no longer in need of your God, and you can act the whole drama of Fall and Redemption to its end in yourself."⁸

Maritain sees no disjunction between humility and courage. On the contrary, he regards them as interdependent. When one exercises the humility needed to allow something other than the self—extramental reality—to be the measure of things, one does not, by the same stroke, divorce either humility from courage or self from self-realization. Although something other than the self serves as the measure of truth, it is only through the self, through the decisive employment of one's active intellect, that such a realization can take place. One brings to bear on extramental being a light that emerges from one's own active intellect.⁹ A confluence of two streams of light occurs. As Maritain states, "even in our own case it is still the intellect—the intellect that illumines, a created participation in God's intellectual light—that makes things intelligible in act and which, by means of things and the senses, determines the intellect that knows." The intellect has the extraordinary capacity to see what it itself expresses, to be "transparent with its own transparency."¹⁰ It may be this very transparency of the intellect that occasions some people either to fail to realize its existence as part of their own being, or its function as illuminative of that which arises from outside their being.

For Maritain, the light by which the intellect first comes into contact with being is also the light which, upon analysis, provides the most natural

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Morgenrothe*, n. 79.

⁹ St. Thomas writes in *In Aristotelis Libros De Sensu et Sensato* (ed. Marietti), lect. 1 no. 1: "Quae vero a nobis a materialibus conditionibus sunt abstracta, fiunt intelligibilia actu per lumen nostri intellectus agentis." ("Those things which are abstracted by us from material conditions, become intelligible in act through the light of our agent intellect.")

¹⁰ *DK*, p. 109.

and effective refutation of idealism. On the other hand, there is a second or subsequent light, not the light that manifests what is, but a reflexive light that shines on our awareness of that which is. To treat the second light as if it came first and deserved primacy, is preposterous in the truest sense of the word (*prae + posterius*: putting "before" what should come "after"). It results in excluding extramental reality and closing the mind in on itself. It results, therefore, in idealism. Consequently, according to Maritain, "Idealism sets an original sin against the light at the beginning of the whole philosophical edifice."¹¹

The consequences of this original sin against the light, this darkening of the intellect, as it were, are dire, for, as Maritain contends, it is metaphysics that reveals authentic values and their hierarchy, provides a center for ethics, binds together in justice the whole universe of knowledge, and delineates the natural limits, harmony and subordination of the different sciences.¹²

Maritain uses his image of sinning against the light most advisedly. He also welcomes its employment by other writers. In *The Degrees of Knowledge*, for example, he approvingly quotes Garrigou-Lagrange, who accuses Descartes, the founder of modern idealism, of "committing a sin against the Holy Ghost or the redeeming light in the spiritual order".¹³ In *St. Thomas Aquinas*, he includes the encyclical *Aeterni Patris* in which Pope Leo XIII denounces the intellectual sins committed against the light, while urging his readers to dispel the darkness of error.

Gerald B. Phelan states that the cause of the malady afflicting the modern mind that Maritain examines in *The Degrees of Knowledge*—a work whose French-to-English translation Phelan himself supervised—"is a suicidal decision of philosophers to disown completely the proper function of the intelligence and to place as the first condition of all knowledge an initial sin against the light."¹⁴

In its most fundamental implication, the act of sinning against the light represents a neglect, if not an outright rejection, of that illuminating factor which allows the intellect to establish its vital contact with a world outside of itself. The immediate philosophical consequence of this intellectual sin is idealism, along with its innumerable sub-species. A secondary consequence

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 78. Cf. R. Garrigou-Lagrange, "Le réalisme thomiste et le mystère de la connaissance," *Revue de Philosophie* (1931): p. 14.

¹⁴ Gerald B. Phelan, *Jacques Maritain* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1937), p. 14.

is a neglect or rejection of God who is the light par excellence in which man participates in order to gain knowledge of reality. In this regard, both Maritain and St. Thomas have emphasized the significance of the Psalmist's words: "The light of Thy countenance, O Lord, is signed upon us."¹⁵

These two implications associated with sinning against the light—the epistemological and the theological—are also found in the thought of John Henry Newman. In Newman's case, in contrast with that of Maritain and St. Thomas, their clearest articulation is more personal than intellectual, more dramatic than dispassionately philosophical.

While Newman was in Sicily in 1832, he had fallen victim to a severe fever which lasted for three weeks. Utterly convinced he was going to die, he made final arrangements with his Italian servant. In a memorandum he wrote many years later, Newman recalled the unlikely and unexpected words he kept saying to himself during the time of this critical illness: "I shall not die, I shall not die, for I have not sinned against the light . . . God has still a work for me to do."¹⁶ In reiterating these words, he may have been unconsciously reproducing Psalm 118 verse 17: "I shall not die, but I shall live, and declare the works of the Lord." At any rate, subsequent events were to prove beyond any question that he did, indeed, have much work to do for the Lord.

When his condition had greatly improved, Newman left Sicily and began sailing for home. He crossed the Mediterranean bound for Marseilles. But his ship was becalmed for an entire week between Corsica and Sardinia in the Straits of Bonifacio. It was on this occasion that Newman penned his most endearing poem, which begins as follows:

Lead Kindly light, amid the encircling gloom,
 Lead Thou me on!
 The Night is dark, and I am far from home—
 Lead Thou me on!

The poem brings many things to mind: Newman's own loneliness, depressed spirit, and homesickness, as well as the darkness of the world, the darkening of man's intellect, and the eclipse of God. The enveloping multi-layered darkness moved Newman to recognize, with great emotional force, both the necessity and compelling significance of light.

¹⁵ *DK*, 126, and Psalm 4, 7. Cf. *Summa Theologiae* Ia, q. 79, a. 4.

¹⁶ John Moody, *John Henry Newman* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1945), p. 32; John A. O'Brien, "John Henry Newman: Scholar of Oxford," in *Giants of Faith* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1957), p. 146.

In *Education at the Crossroads*, Maritain makes the comment that it is not likely that "if God spoke, it was to say nothing to human intelligence."¹⁷ Here, Maritain is presenting what he regards to be one of the main tasks of education in the modern world, namely, elaborating the organic relationship between theology, rooted in faith, and philosophy, rooted in reason. "Newman was right," Maritain remarks, "in stating that if a university professes it to be its scientific duty to exclude theology from its curriculum, 'such an Institution cannot be what it professes, if there be a God'"¹⁸ "University Education without Theology," Newman writes in his book *On the Scope and Nature of University Education*, "is simply unphilosophical. Theology has at least as good a right to claim a place there as Astronomy."¹⁹

In the contemporary world of education, it is commonplace for philosophy and theology to be divorced from each other. Yet, the greater and more paralyzing divorce to which these disciplines are subject is the one which separates them from their own proper sources of light. Philosophy, especially in its epistemological roots, suffers in two ways: from *relativism*, wherein the intellectual light is deemed too weak to distinguish truth from error; and from *Skepticism*, wherein the intellectual light is deemed so weak that truth cannot be distinguished from nothing. On the other hand, theology also suffers in two ways: from *cynicism*, which rejects God's light and replaces it with something negative; and from a form of *nihilism*, which rejects God's light as well, but replaces it with nothing. Together, these four ways of sinning against the light occupy a dominant place in the world of contemporary education. It may be a decisive step toward exorcising these sins and allowing the intellect to reestablish its relationship with its proper object, as Maritain contends, by letting the intellect become more conscious of the nature of the problem. With this in mind, a brief examination of each of these four sins against the light may prove helpful.

Relativism

Allan Bloom, who holds that "education is the movement from darkness to light,"²⁰ makes the following unabashed statement at the beginning of his best-selling book, *The Closing of the American Mind*: "There is one

¹⁷ Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1943), p. 82.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ John Henry Cardinal Newman, *On the Scope and Nature of University Education* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1943), p. 33.

²⁰ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), p. 265.

thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering university believes, or says he believes that truth is relative."²¹

The students to whom Bloom refers do have values. But the light by which they grasp them appears so faint that it does not provide these young relativists with the conviction that such values are more real than their opposites. Consequently, they withdraw from judging certain things to be true or good and others to be false or evil. This twilight mentality, however, has not proven to be particularly disconcerting. In fact, it is usually taken to indicate the presence of a virtue, that of "open-mindedness." Professor Bloom would have relativists abandon their world of shadows and come out into the light where the distinction between truth and falsity, good and evil, becomes sharp. But relativists try to justify their opposition to making such sharp distinctions in the interest of preserving their attitude of equality toward everyone and everything. Rather than judge what is good, they prefer to judge that it is good not to judge. Nonetheless, the ideological world of equality, tolerance, and open-mindedness thereby constructed is precisely that, an ideological construction, having no foundation in reality and offering no practical guidelines by which people can conduct their lives.

When Plato, at the beginning of Book VII of his *Republic*, drew a sharp distinction between the darkness of the Cave and the brilliance of the noon-time sun, he was anticipating, in his own way, St. Paul's remark that "Light and darkness have nothing in common." Light and darkness are not equal. Therefore, the relativist position that deems them to be so fails to demonstrate the virtue of open-mindedness and illustrates the vice of closed-mindedness.

To be open-minded without any prospect of grasping truth, to be always in a state of intellectual suspense, defeats the purpose of being open-minded and reveals a condition of empty-mindedness. In this sense, an "open mind" is not more fulfilling than a empty stomach. To be always open is to be always empty.

Skepticism

A relativist may have his values but he does not hold to them with enough strength that he would have any reason to object to a contradictory set of values. A skeptic would not be sure he had his own values, however subjective and tenuous their basis might be. The relativist can say "this is true for me, but perhaps not true for you," whereas the skeptic would say, "I'm not sure this is true for either of us".

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

In Christopher Derrick's witty and insightful book, *Escape from Scepticism: Liberal Education as if Truth Mattered*, the author claims that "most colleges and universities today" provide "an indoctrination in scepticism, a form of compulsory miseducation that paralyzes and imprisons the mind."²² He relates a personal anecdote involving a conversation he had with two young philosophy majors from American "liberal arts colleges of repute." The students professed their scepticism to him, insisting that the mind cannot know any truths whatsoever of an objective order. When it was time for the students to take their leave, they expressed concern about getting to the train station on time. Professor Derrick calmly pointed out that if there is no real and knowable world within which their train could function in objective terms of time and space, their anxiety is entirely unfounded. This comment irritated them a little. They felt that philosophy and liberal education is one thing, perhaps nothing more than amusing intellectual games, but the practical business of catching trains is quite another.

Skeptics, very much like relativists, find virtue in their unenlightened state. As a result of being doubtful about everything, the skeptic is never able to secure enough reality ever to offend anyone. Therefore, in presuming himself free from any dogma, he prides himself in being broad-minded and above discrimination.

Maritain, following Aristotle and Aquinas, distinguishes between a doubt that is lived or exercised, and one that is signified as a hypothesis that should be examined. He rejects the possibility of doubting everything, for that would include one salient fact—the essential ordination of the intellect to being—which one already knows. "Realism," he writes, "is lived by the intellect before being recognized by it."²³ Universal doubt cannot lead to a grasp of being; it remains closed within itself as an endless circle of doubt. Critical doubt, on the other hand, is a bulwark against scepticism because, as Maritain argues, it shows that universal doubt is unrealizable, and that the mind grasps its proper object prior to any reflexive activity.

Cynicism

Plato explained that anyone who entered the Cave after being in the sun, his eyes still blinking from their exposure to the light, would appear foolish when he tried to educate those who knew nothing other than a world of

²² Christopher Derrick, *Escape from Scepticism: Liberal Education as if Truth Mattered* (Chicago: Sherwood Sugden & Co., 1977), p. 47.

²³ *DK*, p. 79.

shadows. "Wouldn't they all laugh at him," asked Plato, "and say he had spoiled his eyesight by going up there, and it was not worthwhile so much as to try to go up?"²⁴

The cynic takes a hostile view of light. He sees it as a liability, a source of presumption and error. He much prefers the comfort of the Cave.

Richard Neuhaus conjures up the image of Plato's Cave when he speaks of the mythical but ubiquitous "Totheline U." "Totheline" symbolizes the cave mentality of contemporary higher education where "conformity and cowardice" are more valued than the kind of creative and courageous scholarship educational institutions need in order to exercise their proper responsibilities. According to Neuhaus, "the academy today is, in very large part, the enemy of the intellectual life."²⁵ In fact, it may be difficult to imagine anything more anti-intellectual than the rigid party line that characterizes the groves of contemporary academe. At "Totheline" one cannot begin to speak in an enlightened way about issues such as abortion, contraception, euthanasia, feminism, homosexuality, chastity, justice, culture, aesthetics, and so on, without being accused, in effect, of imposing an alien light, thereby causing extreme discomfort. Just as a good pair of sunglasses filters out harmful ultra-violet light, a good pair of academic blinkers is supposed to screen out the harmful light of truth. The object of education for the cynic, then, is to keep people in the dark where they are comfortable, and away from that dreadful agent of illumination known as "light" which can cause only disruption, pain, embarrassment, and guilt.

The notion that light is an enemy of knowledge is not without its champions in science. In 1927, physicist Werner Heisenberg formulated his famous "Principle of Indeterminacy" which states that it is not possible, in principle, to determine both the position and the velocity of a particular electron. The reason for this is that photons of ordinary light exert a violent force of electrons thereby altering their position and velocity. The scientist who views the electrons with an extremely high-powered electron microscope is not seeing things as they are in themselves (or as they would be if he had not tried to see them). His act of seeing intrudes upon them. Light actually *interferes* with knowing the electrons in their objectivity. It is, therefore, an enemy of knowledge.

Intense or excessive light is known to cause a wide range of discomforts and diseases from sunburn to cancer. Light can be irritating, blinding, glar-

²⁴ Plato, *Republic* VII 517b.

²⁵ Richard Neuhaus, "Against Peer Fear," *First Things* (May 1993): p. 53.

ing, dazzling, and distracting. In Johann Peter Hebel's *Nibelungen*, Brunhilda epitomizes the cynic's aversion to light. Upon reaching the bright lands of Burgundy, having left her own country where an eternal night reigns, she exclaims:

I cannot get accustomed to so much light,
It hurts me, I feel as though I am going about naked,
As though no gown here would be thick enough!²⁶

The fact of the matter is that science does not support a cynical view of light. Light that interferes with the knowing process or causes harm in some way is not light as a *principle of manifestation*, but light as a physical entity. The cynic fails to understand how light is truly a source of illumination.

Nihilism

The strongest opposition to light comes from the nihilist who simply denies that it exists. In essence, as Marion Montgomery has expressed it, nihilism is the isolated mind encountering the void.²⁷

The form of nihilism that is enjoying a great deal of popularity in North American colleges and universities at present is a form of literary criticism which assumes metaphysical significance known as *deconstructionism*. It is the creation of the post-Sartrean generation of Parisian Heideggerians, notably Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault. The word "deconstruction" is derived from Heidegger's call for the destruction (*Destruktion*) of ontology, or the metaphysics of being. Derrida originally used the word "destruction" before settling on "deconstruction."²⁸

Deconstructionism reduces the world to the word, or reality to a text. The deconstructionist approaches a text, therefore, as if it had no referents, either to the world, to the author, or even to the meaning of the words themselves. As one disciple puts it: "meaning is fascist."²⁹ Derrida, himself, in *Of Grammatology*, states, "There is nothing outside the text" ("*Il n'y a rien hors du texte.*"). To deconstruct is to unmask, demystify, dismantle, and above all, strip clean of any reference to the transcendent. It is not to elucidate. There is no such thing as the real world; the text is all. In his excellent

²⁶ Richard Peter Hebel, *The Nibelungs*, "The Death of Siegfried," Act II, scene 6.

²⁷ Marion Montgomery, "Deconstruction and Eric Voegelin," *Crisis* (June 1988).

²⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. xlix.

²⁹ David Lehman, *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), p. 58.

study of deconstructionism. David Lehman speaks of its "relentless nihilistic drive" to assert its dogma that nothing can be known.³⁰ Deconstructionism rests on the fundamental principle of "wall-to-wall textuality."³¹

The great enemy of deconstruction is "logocentrism," particularly the Logos in The Gospel according to St. John.³² The light of reason that shines from the *logos* is anathema for self-respecting deconstructionists, for it is alleged to be a principal source of meaning, direction, and purpose, both in the course of the universe and in the lives of men.

Deconstructionists, themselves, view the process of reducing being to a void not so much as nihilistic but as a way of escaping what they call the "closure of knowledge." Therefore, they see placing a text in the abyss (*mettre en abîme*) as achieving an abyss of freedom. They are intoxicated by the prospect of deconstructing all limitations and never hitting bottom.³³ By their eager acceptance of "undecidability" and their penchant for putting words "under erasure" (*sous rature*), they do not experience despair, but presume themselves emancipated from the tyranny of all authority, floating on a wing of limitless creativity. It is nihilism, so to speak, with a happy ending.

Many critics of deconstructionism see it as an intellectual fad, an academic cult, a philosophy of the absurd, or more imaginatively, "the squiggle of fancy French mustard on the hot dog of banal observation."³⁴ Walter Jackson Bate, Harvard University's most prestigious literary critic, speaks for many when he denounces deconstructionism as representing "a nihilistic view of literature, of human communication, and of life itself."

The phrase in Genesis, "Let there be light," has a twofold significance. It signifies the Light by which the world came into being, and "light" as a principle of manifestation, that by which it is possible for human beings to know things that have come into being, and to embark on that path which leads from the light of knowledge to the Light of the Creator.

Creative Light makes the world a reality: illuminating light makes it knowable. In the absence of illuminating light, nothing can be known and no advantage can be gained, not the "open-mindedness" that relativists assume, or the "broad-mindedness" that skeptics suppose, nor the "freedom from discomfort" that cynics presume, or the "abyss of freedom" that de-

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 77

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

³² *Ibid.*, 42.

³³ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. lxxvii.

³⁴ Lehman, *Signs of the Times*, p. 22.

constructionists allege. If nothing can be known on an intellectual level, then nothing can be gained on a practical one. "If your eye is worthless, your whole body will be in darkness."³⁵

In dealing with the question concerning whether it was fitting that light was made on the first day, Aquinas, with his customary directness and simplicity, states: "That without which there could not be day, must have been made on the first day."³⁶ Just as there can be no day without light, so too, there can be no education without intellectual enlightenment. Consequently, the various sins against the light—relativism, skepticism, cynicism, and nihilism—are also sins against education.

³⁵ Matthew 6:13.

³⁶ *Summa Theologiae* Ia, q. 67, a. 4.