

Learning as Recollection— A Thomistic Approach to Recovering Higher Education

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Perhaps the two works of Jacques Maritain to which most of his students would be most inclined to look for a Maritainian philosophy of education are *Education at the Crossroads* and *The Education of Man*.¹ While such might be the case, I propose to turn to neither of these roads to education as the starting point for my present study. Instead, I shall turn to an earlier work of Maritain, namely, *The Dream of Descartes*,² as to a road not taken in either of the two former treatises, for the main principles of my reflections upon the problems in the state of current higher education in the United States—and for some suggested Thomistic remedies to these difficulties.

Among other things, a main reason I have chosen this approach is because, despite the fact that I consider these later works to be filled with all sorts of insights, it seems to me that both books neglect aspects of education in general and of higher education in particular which are not only sorely in need of reconsideration today but which were also recognized by Maritain as essentially neglected by the Modern turn in higher learning taken by Descartes in the seventeenth century. Specifically, that to which I am referring is Maritain's observation in the latter book about Descartes's

¹ Cf. Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1943) and *The Education of Man: The Educational Philosophy of Jacques Maritain*, Donald and Idella Gallagher, eds. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1962).

² Jacques Maritain, *The Dream of Descartes*, trans. Mabelle Andison (New York: Philosophical Library, 1944).

distrust of books and teachers, as well as of sensation, imagination, memory and intellectual abstraction apart from regulation by mathematics.³ In my opinion, while contemporary college students suffer from a great deal of deficiencies, in particular what they suffer from is attention deficiency, dullness of imagination, weakness of memory, an almost total inability to think abstractly, and an overall inability to read a book. Furthermore, I think that a major reason that students find themselves in their present predicament lies in the Cartesian turn in learning that overthrew the classical faculty psychology of thinkers like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and the Medieval and Renaissance scholastics as well as the *trivium* of liberal arts, and of theoretical sciences, and acts of intellectual abstraction as essential elements in the process of higher education.

Assuming that most would agree with me that the problems which I have identified are among the most serious ones confronting contemporary college students, let me suggest how I think we might use classical insights about learning to begin to reverse this ever-increasing decline in higher learning.

To begin with, I think it important that when we speak about learning we recognize we are, in some way, talking about adding to our knowledge; and that when we talk about knowledge what we are talking about is an activity by means of which human beings are able, at the very least, to distinguish, in a sensory way, the existence of one thing from the existence of another. While it might be the case that in dreams people might begin their knowing with clear and distinct ideas, for those of us who do philosophy as waking beings, it is essential to recognize that all knowing is an act not of a pure reason, but of an organic being, which originates with sensory contact with the existence of physical things.

This bare minimum of evident truth being admitted, I think we can all recognize that in order to go beyond this minimum of knowing, and to come to know with some sort of essential precision, as the great philosophers of antiquity generally recognized, what is needed is that human beings acquire experience, and that such experience presupposes the possession on the part of human beings of a faculty called a memory. Indeed, I think one of the most important discoveries of classical philosophy is the observation made by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle that it is the possession of a memory which makes any animal capable of learning.⁴ The reason that

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 61–103.

⁴ Socrates and Plato are well known for their identification of learning with recollection. In *Metaphysics* I.1 980a27–980b24, Aristotle stresses both the possession of memory and of *hearing* as necessary abilities for the teaching of animals.

this ancient observation is true is not only that a memory helps human beings to conserve the past so as to compare some previously sensed content to a presently sensed being but also to account for the existence of human habits.⁵

Habits, that is, only come into being through the conjoined action of the human memory and a particular faculty. For this reason, indeed, a person can only possess a habit for so long as a person *remembers* how to do something; and, furthermore, for this reason, primary education, or learning in its first beginnings, consists in inculcating the external and internal senses of a child with much memory.

That is, children are living organic beings who first come to know through the exercise of external sense faculties operating in conjunction with immaturely developed sense organs. What helps to bring these sense organs and their respective faculties to maturity is the healthy repetition of their own specific organic facultative acts. For this to occur, however, these external sense acts must be naturally inclined to take direction from the human memory, which puts these acts to masterful use by directing them in conjunction with the human imagination, the human intellect, the human will, and the human emotions. That is, as young human beings begin to repeat the performance of their natural, organic, facultative sense acts under the direction of their memory, they are imbedding these faculties and acts with mnemonic content (which, in its turn, is a kind of knowledge) through the help of emotion-laden images; and they are, thereby, simultaneously, bringing to these specific acts and respective faculties a greater mastery of operation by bringing to them a greater precision in act and also bringing to their respective organs a greater health and strength because these acts are becoming rightly ordered with greater precision by being performed under the habitual direction of knowledge.

Let me add that no human being remembers anything, or is able to put any sense organ to use in a conscious way, without the employment both of images and the human emotions—which only operate in response to the presence of images. For what enables a person to direct the senses is a command of the human intellect and the assent of the human will; and the human intellect cannot become active without the presence to it of an image, and the human will can only move the various human faculties

⁵ For another study in which I examine the relation of memory, habits, and learning see my article "Saving the Academic Soul: the 'Fallacy of Misplaced Historicity,' the Wisdom of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, and the *Via Media*," *Measure* 106 (May 1992): pp. 1; 8–11.

through its direction of the human emotions under the command of the intellect. Thus St. Thomas asserts:

An image is the starting point of our knowledge, for it is that from which the operation of the intellect begins. . . . This is because images are related to the intellect as objects in which it sees, either through a perfect representation or through a negation. Consequently, when our knowledge of images is impeded, we must be completely incapable of knowing anything with our intellect even about divine things.⁶

And he adds both that, "emotion is a movement of the appetitive power in the imagination of good or evil";⁷ and that:

the sensitive appetite is subject to the will with respect to execution, which occurs through the motive power. In other animals motion results immediately from concupiscible and irascible appetite, just as a sheep, fearing the wolf, immediately flees, because the sheep is devoid of any superior appetite which might restrain it. But a human being is not immediately moved by irascible and concupiscible appetite: but awaits the command of the will, which is a superior appetite. Hence an inferior appetite is not sufficient to move unless a superior appetite consent.⁸

What is most important to realize from these above references to Aquinas is that not only is it possible for certain human faculties to exercise influence over others, but that when it comes to adding to one's knowledge, once this influence is accepted by a person's will and commanded by the intellect, the human imagination and the human memory play an essential role in all learning—whether it be higher or lower.

Thus, in the case of elementary and secondary learning, the young child and adolescent are primarily involved in gaining mastery over their external and internal sense faculties through the habituation of these faculties under the rational direction of sense memory and imagination, which themselves are in the process of maturing as they engage in exercising their direction over the other sense faculties. Furthermore, central to this process is the docility of the human imagination to take direction from the memory. The imagination, however, is flexible to the extent that it is fertile; and just as the external sense faculties are knowing faculties to the extent that they are capable of extracting sensible content from their contact with sensible

⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the de Trinitate of Boethius*, q. 5, a. 2, ad 5, trans. Armand A. Maurer in *St. Thomas Aquinas: The Division and Methods of the Sciences* (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1963), p. 71.

⁷ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* IaIIae, q. 22, a. 3, sed contra.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Ia, q. 81, a. 3, c.

beings, so the imagination initiates its being as an actual knowing faculty to the extent that it is capable of extracting its own imaginable content from what is given to the external senses in external sense apprehension.

At first, however, these images are crude constructions; for the imagination itself has not been habituated to direct its activities with precision through the reasoned application of the human memory to the exercise of its own specific activity. As its visual, aural, tactile and other images become more and more precise, however, a person becomes capable of representing imaginable content in a more refined, uniform and contracted way. That is, a person begins to be able to represent images in a standardized way by means of hieroglyphs; and gives birth to the written and legible word. Following upon this, through a further contraction, uniformity and refinement of sensible images, human language arises to a level of imaginative abstraction in which a person becomes capable of using a phonetic alphabet to represent the content of the human imagination to the human memory and human intellect.⁹

The import of the above observations about the maturing of the human imagination is that since it is through the use of the human memory and the human emotions that the various sense and intellectual faculties eventually become capable of becoming habituated under the direction of the human intellect and will, it is through the development of the use of language that the content of the human imagination gains a uniformity and simplicity which enables it to prepare the human memory eventually to serve the human intellect in such a way as to raise intellectual activity to a level of highest human learning.

In order to understand how this occurs, it is necessary to recall, first of all that, for St. Thomas, a person is possessed not of one, but of two mnemonic faculties—a sensory one and an intellectual one. In addition, it is also helpful to recall that, for him, it is not the faculty which knows but the person who knows through the integrated action of various human faculties. Indeed, as Gilson has rightly noted, for St. Thomas a person senses with the human intellect and intellectualizes with the human senses.¹⁰ If such be the case a person equally imagines with the intellect and intellectualizes with the imagination. Now, for St. Thomas, the sense faculties include a particular or estimative reason—the development of which is prin-

⁹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: New American Library, 1964), pp. 81–90; 145–50.

¹⁰ Etienne Gilson, *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*, trans. Mark A. Wauck (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), pp. 171–215.

cipally serviced by the other internal and external sense faculties—including the human memory and the human imagination. None of these faculties, however, either singly or in concert, is capable of developing human art, or, more generally, what we would call today “skill.”

Yet it is through the use of skill, which involves employment, among other faculties, of both the human memory and the human imagination, that human beings raise the imaginable content of the mind to the level of linguistic uniformity; and are, thereby, provided with the primary tool through which human beings become capable of raising their intellects to a level of scientific habituation. The latter, however, requires not merely a refined and uniform content in the human imagination but also a mnemonic positioning and placement of this content in some sort of temporal and spatial order. That is to say, it is only as the human intellect begins to apprehend some sort of conceptual content in a mnemonically ordered way that human beings develop a habitual imaginative flexibility of phonetic language which enables them to think with a kind of intellectual abstraction needed to do the work of science.

To put all this in another way, one should recall that, for the Ancient Greeks, what today we call the “liberal arts” were first called “music”; and the Ancients so conceived of them because they were the daughters of Zeus and Memory. These arts, that is, were fine arts—arts which habituated not the body in the performance of servile work but the imaginative and mnemonic faculties of the human person in the service of human activities organized under direction of universal principles inspired either by the gods or by the natural inspiration of the human intellect.¹¹ As such, the liberal arts were and are principally and primarily language arts. Yet simply as language arts they require some association with arts of measurement, for all human knowledge begins with the sensible apprehension of physical beings. Physical beings, however, are not only diversified by quantity but sensible qualities are unintelligible apart from reference to quantity. Furthermore, the notion of quantity contains the notions of place and position.¹² Language arts, that is, cannot exist apart from mathematical arts. For the writer, the reader, the speaker, and the listener have to have a sense of measurement, order, due proportion, position, placement, geometrical line, surface, length, height, depth, breadth and so on just to be able to form an

¹¹ E.R. Curtius, *European Literature and The Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Pantheon Books, Bollingen Series 36, 1953), pp. 228–246.

¹² St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the de Trinitate of Boethius*, q. 5, a. 3, trans. Maurer. See especially Maurer’s notes 33 and 35.

image in the form of a hieroglyph or of the refined line drawing of a phonetic letter.

Such arts are liberal, therefore, because they truly free the mind by providing it with essential tools by means of which it is enabled to do its work in a superior and excellent way. One of the reasons that this is so is because, as we mentioned above, and as noted by St. Thomas, the work of the intellect precisely as such begins with the imagination. That is to say, the human intellect becomes active as an intellect only when presented by its appropriate intelligible content; and this it receives not directly from external sensible being but from the content of the human imagination. Or, to put this all in another, and perhaps simpler, way, it is impossible for any human being to comprehend anything in an appropriately intellectual way unless a person can first imagine it in the *right* way. Intellectual abstraction from the human imagination, that is, is not a static act, nor is it simply one of intellectual apprehension. Rather, it is a dynamic act involving both apprehension and judgment of the intellect in the content of the imagination; and acts which are also involved in the abstraction of imaginable content from the content of external sense apprehension and judgment. This is so true that, as Stanley L. Jaki has so meticulously documented, it is precisely because so many cultures and civilizations have been unable dynamically to imagine the physical universe in a non-cyclical and non-deterministic fashion that they have been unable to make the sort of progress in physics that has been possible by people capable of imagining the universe to be the free creation of a creator God.¹³

Intellectual conceptualization and judgment, in short, involve intellectual abstraction. Such abstraction, however, never takes place apart from a corresponding kind of imagining. Indeed, it essentially involves it. For abstraction is abstraction from something. For appropriate imagining to take place, however, a person must have a rich imagination, and such an imagination cannot be developed without rich and flexible linguistic skills as well as precise intellectual apprehension and judging skills. It is for this reason, among others, that premature specialization kills the scientific intellect—for it stunts free play of the human imagination upon which depends not only the refinement of the imagination but also the very maturity of the human intellect in the direction of scientific activity.

To develop precision in intellectual conceptualization and science and wisdom in judgment, moreover, more is needed than simple flexibility of

¹³ Cf. Stanley L. Jaki, *Science and Creation: From Eternal Cycles to an Oscillating Universe* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1986).

imagination and refinement of imaginable content. Beyond these, that is, is required a freedom and ability of intellect to consider its conceptual content in a universal fashion according to its different modes of imagining and of testing truth. For while all intellectual knowing has its initial beginning in an act of abstraction from the content of the human imagination, intellectual knowledge of any sort achieves its completion in an act of judgment. Consequently, while a knowledge of the qualitative features of physical things both begins and must be completed in an intellectual act verified in external sensation, the same is not the case with respect either to a knowledge of quantitative or metaphysical modes of being. For quantity is a property which is essentially subjectified in the substance of a thing, but is not so subjectified through a dependence upon quality. Thus, while the matter of a substance acts as the subject for its surface quantity, this surface quantity, in turn, acts as the subject for its color. Consequently, St. Thomas says, the notion of a quantity devoid of qualities is something as comprehensible to the human intellect as is the notion of a quantity which is not moving, but it is impossible to think about a qualified or moving substance without simultaneously thinking about some sort of figure or quantity so qualified.¹⁴ Hence, while all knowing begins with some sort of sense stimulus and requires that the intellect work with images, it is the image upon which the human intellect depends for the principle of its intelligibility (rather than some act of external sensation) which determines where the act of intellection achieves its maturity and locus of verification. To conceptualize quantity the human intellect has no need to work with images which cannot be framed and considered apart from the imagining of sensible qualities any more than it has to think about one color or another when conceiving of justice or of God. As a result, the truth of an intellectual judgment about quantity is in no essential need of verification in conjunction with sensible qualities; and for this reason, intellectual judgments about mathematical beings, at times, need only to be verified by reference to their being in the imagination. As St. Thomas says:

the knowledge we have through judgment in mathematics must terminate in the imagination and not in the senses, because mathematical judgment goes beyond sensory perception. Thus the judgment about a mathematical line is not always the same as that about a sensible line. For example, that a straight line touches a sphere at only one point is true of an abstract line but not of a straight line in matter. . . .¹⁵

¹⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the de Trinitate of Boethius*, q. 5, a. 3, trans. Maurer.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, q. 6, a. 2

The import of this reference to the nature of human intellectual abstraction is, at the very least, twofold. For the truth of what St. Thomas says means that, as Jacques Maritain well understood, the acquisition of human science is a much more complicated affair than Descartes had ever dreamed. For this reason, any attempt to reduce the whole of science to one and the same mode of abstraction, imagining and method not only is doomed to failure but it is doomed to dull both the human intellect and the human imagination. For the achievement of human science is hard work, requiring a totally different way of putting the human memory to use than the way it is commonly used in primary and secondary education—one in which the human memory helps to elevate the intellect to an entirely new, habitual, abstract and specialized way of directing its own faculties in the acquisition of knowledge—namely, through the logical ordering of greater and greater abstract, and more than abstract, ideas and judgments. For the human memory to assist the intellect in this lofty work, however, what is needed are appropriate objects to be presented to the human imagination as food for abstract thought. Such objects, however, must progressively be further and further remote from immediate apprehension by perception through the external senses. For it is through the habitual abstraction of such transcendent notions that the intellect is able both to achieve its most completely intellectual activity but also its highest quality as an intellect. In short, nothing less than the disciplines of philosophy classically conceived and revealed theology (working through the handmaidens of liberal arts and exercised after the fashion of an Augustine, an Aquinas, a Maimonides, or a Maritain) is capable either of exercising intellectual activity according to its highest form of learning or of saving contemporary higher education from plunging into the abyss which it is currently confronting.