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Maritain and the Future of Reason

One of the most significant determinants of the future of civilization will be the future of human reason. The initial *prise de conscience*, so to speak, of this distinctively human power and the subsequent articulation of its potentialities was the crowning achievement of classical Greece. Thinkers from Thales to Aristotle and beyond found in it a capacity to explore in an objective and systematic manner the structure of the universe from its lowest to its highest levels. So significant was this capacity in their eyes that an Aristotle could find in its possession the specifically defining characteristic of man.

As the Greek rational achievement in its fullest and most mature accomplishments came into contact with Christian revelation, an elaborate and enormous effort on the part of numerous Christian thinkers eventually forged a positive relationship between reason and revelation. The integrity of both was preserved and human reason was found to be a powerful tool for understanding Christian revelation and for guiding moral life in this world.

In modern times, however, human reason has entered onto stormy seas. Many conflicting conceptions of its nature, its capacities and its role have arisen. Western civilization has been exposed to a plethora of claims in its regard, many exaggerated (for example, Cartesian, idealistic, and enlightenment aspirations) and many minimalistic (for example, empiricist, positivist, Kantian, and analytical approaches).

At the contemporary moment the crisis of reason continues in unabated fashion. Heideggerian, existentialist, hermeneutical, deconstructionist, and sociological conceptions of reason exercise considerable influence in the intellectual and public arenas. Certain of these, especially, grow in strength.

In this climate the thought of Jacques Maritain on the nature, range, and limits of reason can be a beacon of light for many. In the face of various distorted and dangerous notions, his conception of reason retains the positive advances of Greek and medieval thought, and offers as well original thinking of his own refining the classical understanding at various points. His disengagement and exploration of the intellectual supraconscious, his efforts in the face of modern empirical science to delineate precisely the degrees of knowledge and even his treatment of the practical reason and its limitations in, for instance, *On the Church of Christ* exemplify his creativity in this regard.¹

In this paper whose concern is with Maritain and the future of human reason, it will obviously not be possible to explore the issue in an expansive manner. Instead, what I intend to do is to examine briefly the present state of reason as manifested in John Caputo's recent book *Radical Hermeneutics*. As Caputo's own position as expressed in this book is, despite its differences, positively related in a number of respects to certain recent and contemporary continental thinkers, such as Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida, it is envisioned that this paper will be somewhat more broadly informative as well.

First of all, though, some further reference to Maritain. Having derived his fundamental notions of human reason from the Greek and medieval world, in particular from the work of St. Thomas, Maritain devoted a lifetime rationally to exploring the structure of reality in its multiple dimensions. This exploration unfolded in a number of books devoted to an extremely careful, precise and deeply insightful examination of various aspects of reality. Numerous works in areas such as metaphysics, natural theology, the philosophy of nature, moral philosophy, political philosophy, the philosophies of art, of beauty, of history, of education, etc. flowed from his pen throughout some sixty years of publication. Such a project presupposed Greek and medieval confidence in and understanding of the nature and scope of human reason and in

¹Notice, for instance, this comment of Maritain: "In explaining (*Summa theologiae*, II-II, 11, 3) why the heretics must be put to death, St Thomas showed that the great speculatives, when they pronounce on the concrete, run the risk of being led astray by the regime of civilization and the mentality of the time." Jacques Maritain, *On the Church of Christ* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973), 283, n. 20.

particular in its ability slowly and systematically to apprehend the contours of reality.

In *Radical Hermeneutics* John Caputo has offered many of us not completely familiar with some of the most recent directions in contemporary philosophical inquiry a helpful tool for enriching our awareness of what is actually going on. And to those committed to something approximating Maritain's project, the view provided by Caputo in this work is rather disturbing. Caputo concludes his book with three chapters entitled: "Toward a Postmetaphysical Rationality," "Toward an Ethics of Dissemination" and "Openness to the Mystery." From these chapter titles it can correctly be gathered that Caputo's work deals to some significant extent with the themes of metaphysics, ethics and philosophical theology, to all of which Maritain himself devoted considerable attention.

What becomes clear through reading Caputo's work, though, is that both he and a number of well known philosophic thinkers are providing the contemporary world with notions of human reason considerably restricted in comparison with the kind of reason provided us by classic Western thought as encapsulated in the works of a Plato, an Aristotle, a St. Thomas, and a Maritain. Reason is no longer considered capable of making the kinds of judgments or establishing the kinds of conclusions in metaphysics, moral philosophy or philosophical theology that such thinkers considered possible.

The very title of the first chapter previously referred to, "Toward a Postmetaphysical Rationality," seems to indicate that reason is somehow being stripped of its potentiality for metaphysical thinking. This appearance turns out, in fact, to be the case. Caputo writes:

Radical hermeneutics is a lesson in humility; it comes away chastened from its struggle with the flux....It understands the power of the flux to wash away the best-laid schemes of metaphysics. It takes the constructs of metaphysics to be temporary cloud formations which, from the distance, create the appearance of shape and substance but which pass through our fingers upon contact. *Eidos, ousia, esse, res cogitans* and the rest are so many meteorological

illusions, inducing our belief in their permanence and brilliant form yet given to constant dissipation and reformation.²

For Maritain such a statement would appear only possible on the basis of what, in a term taken from Bernard Lonergan, could be called a "profound philosophical oversight." Something foundational has not been seen, has been overlooked, the absence of which seeing entails the correlative absence of an interior intellectual *habitus* upon which the careful and painstaking growth of the science of metaphysics can be grounded. As is well known, Maritain affirmed that metaphysical progress was based upon an intuition, a certain profound experiential contact with the fact that things exist, that they stand outside nothingness, in a word that they have being;³ and this powerful awareness put the individual in contact with the object of the science of metaphysics in a manner that made possible its development. Without contact with its object, a science whose domain pertains to that object is not possible. Small wonder, then, that for Maritain great thinkers such as Immanuel Kant and Edmund Husserl, insightful as they were in certain respects, were, nevertheless, not philosophers in the deepest sense of the term-- namely, metaphysicians.⁴

Yet according to Caputo, as quoted above, metaphysical concepts are "constructs," and "temporary cloud formations passing through our fingers." What does this mean? It certainly indicates that metaphysical concepts do not endure forever. They come and go, but what does this mean? Does it mean that they emerge and pass away because mankind's hold on truth is precarious and as a consequence the flow of history eventually snatches truth from our grip, perhaps to be recovered again at some future point in time? Or does it mean that such concepts come and go because their validity is not of a trans-temporal kind? In such a perspective these concepts could be seen as possessing a kind of truth and validity similar to certain instances of practical truth. For instance, no

²John Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 258.

³Cf. Jacques Maritain, *A Preface to Metaphysics:: Seven Lectures on Being*, (New York: Books for Libraries, Reprint, 1962), 48-64.

⁴See Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), 98-111.

one would wish to deny that certain political structures valid at one point in time are not appropriate at another. Heidegger's viewpoint seems to be similar to this latter possibility. For he appears to have eventually maintained that the diverse metaphysical conceptions of different periods of history, as they give way one to another through time, possess their own validity in such a way that as Caputo writes "there is no privileged meaning or 'truth' of Being...no sending enjoys any rights over any other";⁵ and as Heidegger himself said "Not only do we lack any criterion which would permit us to evaluate the perfection of an epoch of metaphysics as compared with any other epoch, the right to this kind of evaluation does not exist. Plato's thinking is no more perfect than Parmenides. Hegel's philosophy is no more perfect than Kant's. Each epoch of philosophy has its own necessity."⁶ Heidegger here seems to be acknowledging a kind of validity for diverse metaphysical systems, but clearly any validity they possess is not of a trans-temporal, not of a universal kind. Such a view of things would appear, of course, to Thomists in general and certainly to Maritain in particular to imply a radical misunderstanding of the nature of metaphysics. The principles of metaphysics are not ones whose meaningfulness and truth changes from one epoch to another. Such can, as already indicated, be the case with various forms of practical truth wherein prudential judgment can determine that what is fitting and appropriate in one set of circumstances is not so in another. Speculative truth of a metaphysical kind would for Thomists be judged immune from alteration through time.

Caputo, though, seems to be saying even more. He does not want a metaphysics for this time. Instead, he is concerned with a postmetaphysical rationality. For, as we have seen, his claim is that *Eidos, ousia, esse, res cogitans* and the rest are so many meteorological illusions.⁷ An illusion, of course, is an appearance that does not have any reality standing behind it. According to this, then, metaphysical terms, for Caputo, do not stand for anything real. The radicalness of such a position is reaffirmed by such further statements as the claim that the function of radical hermeneutics is

⁵John Caputo, 180.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷*Ibid.*, 258.

to keep the games in play, to keep us on the alert that we draw forms in the sand, we read clouds in the sky, but we do not capture deep essences or find the *arche*. If there is anything that we learn in radical hermeneutics it is that we never get the better of the flux.⁸

Caputo is asserting, then, that human reason is never able to reach fundamental, unchanging metaphysical principle of the kind that Maritain endeavored so carefully to elucidate in such works as *The Degrees of Knowledge, Existence and the Existent*, and *Seven Lectures on Being*.

Maritain's position on these matters is clear. Following St. Thomas, Maritain understood metaphysics to be a science of first causes, of first principles. In regard to the knowledge of the absolutely first cause of all being, this knowledge was understood to be analogical, not univocal, and not comprehensive of its object in any sense of the term. Such knowledge points beyond itself towards an object that in itself transcends human conceptual apprehension. Still, though He is transcendent, analogy makes possible some certain knowledge of God. Such knowledge of first principle in any absolute sense is, however, excluded according to these other thinkers. Heidegger's *Being beyond beings* is never to be reached. There is "no privileged sense of Being and hence no privileged epoch either. There is just a-letheia, the incessant giving and taking of presence over the epochs, the incessant repetition, or playing out again and again, of one metaphysical scheme after another";⁹ and for Derrida there is "no history of Being, no metaphysics...only the free play of differences";¹⁰ and for Caputo, bereft of ultimate principles, we are offered membership in "a *community of mortals* bound together by their common fears and lack of metaphysical grounds, sharing a common fate at the hands of the flux, sent by a *Geshick* which will not disclose its name, which does not have a name."¹¹

What about Caputo's chapter on ethics? What kind of ethics emerges from his attitude towards the unattainability of fundamental, unalterable metaphysical principle? What arises is a conception of the function of ethics that is quite different from the kind of moral philosophy

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Ibid.*, 181.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 170.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 159.

envisaged by Maritain. As is relatively well known, Maritain entertained a position regarding moral philosophy that was controversial in Thomistic circles. The question at issue had to do with the relationship between moral philosophy and moral theology. Rather than holding as did a large number of Thomistic thinkers that moral philosophy was a science completely autonomous and independent in its own right, though admittedly inadequate to the actual structure of reality as known through Christian revelation, Maritain argued that the principles of moral philosophy were subalternated to the principles of moral theology.¹² However his position is to be precisely interpreted on this point, it is certain that for Maritain human reason is able to attain through its own resources a knowledge of certain stable moral principles possessing unalterable validity for a universal science of ethics.

But with Caputo things are quite different. The inability of reason to apprehend stable, universal principle leads for him towards what he calls an ethics of dissemination. Such an ethics arises from the collapse of metaphysical ethics, which collapses with the fall of metaphysics. Heidegger, Caputo indicates, ascertained that there is no truth of Being or unitary meaning to Being. Instead there are many meanings or truths to Being;¹³ but if there is no privileged truth to Being, then there is no privileged ethics or moral philosophy. We are left instead with the realization that, as Caputo writes, "there is no primordial ethos but only the manifold senses of ethos, the array of historical differences";¹⁴ but what does such a situation entail for the possibility today of guiding human action in these complex times? Where can we turn if moral philosophy is subject to the same dissolution as metaphysical systems? To this Caputo writes: "My argument will be that action today takes its point of departure not from fixed points of reference and steady principles (as in a metaphysical ethics) but precisely from the dissemination of principles and primordial epochs. It is precisely from the breakdown of standpoints and resting points of all sorts that we begin to act."¹⁵ Such

¹²See Jacques Maritain, "*De la Philosophie Chrétienne*," *Jacques et Raïssa Maritain, Oeuvres Complètes*, V (Fribourg: Editions Universitaires, 1982), 302-316.

¹³John Caputo, 238.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵*Ibid.*

a viewpoint leads Caputo to conclude that we should not act from the vantage point of those who have all the answers, of those who are completely secure in the rightness of their course. We should act rather with a heightened sense of our own fallibility.

In his final chapter, "Openness to the Mystery," Caputo speaks of God, of faith, of religion, and of various related themes. To one who has come to understand and accept the traditional Catholic concept of faith what he has to say about faith appears flawed. He writes:

Religion is...*authentic* only as long as it *owns up* to the contingency of its symbols...we do not know who we are, not if we are honest, or whether or not we believe in God: that is the point of departure of any genuine faith....The believer is not someone who has been visited on high by a supervenient grace but someone who, like the rest of us, does what he can to construe the darkness, to follow the sequence of shadows across the cave, to cope with the flux.¹⁶

Clearly, though, Catholic faith is not something that "owns up to the contingency of its symbols," nor would it accept that we do not know who we are. In regards to the latter, for example, faith enables us to understand that we are children of God, persons made in his image and likeness; and the believer is someone who does, in fact, believe that he has been visited from on high by grace, at least in the form of an offer. He believes this because he understands that we are called to share in a higher life, in God's very own life and joy and that such sharing requires a principle greater than those principles intrinsic to our nature, namely grace; and the believer is one to be sure who does what he can to cope with the flux; but he is also one who knows through faith of realities beyond the flux.

In regard to this chapter, however, it is not primarily of such matters that I wish to speak. Instead, I want to consider the theme of philosophical theology. Early in the chapter, I began to wonder whether somehow I had been seriously misunderstanding Caputo up to that point. One can begin to get the impression there that what he is saying is more in accord with St. Thomas and with Maritain than at first appeared; and, at this point, the validity of some of my judgments regarding what he was

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 281.

actually saying began to come into question in my mind. Had I really been able to sufficiently pin down his meaning? What, in fact, did he really mean? Did he really mean what he seemed to mean? Were many of his words really saying what they obviously seemed to be saying? Or, in radical hermeneutical terms was something *now emerging into presence that would thrust what I thought was there back into the flux*? Was Caputo less radical than he had earlier seemed? Further reading and analysis, however, re-established prior evaluations and led to the conclusion that earlier judgments made regarding his meaning were relatively adequate.

In this last chapter Caputo begins to speak of a difference between our concepts and what is beyond our concepts. Meister Eckhart is brought forth as exemplifying someone who appreciated this difference and knew not to take our concepts too seriously. For Eckhart knew a point of the soul where contact with God revealed the futility of human concepts, revealed them, in fact, to be nonsense.¹⁷ Apart from calling human concepts nonsense, Caputo's distinction between what our concepts can capture and the domain transcending our concepts is thoroughly Thomistic and Maritainian; and so at this point we can, as I mentioned above, begin to wonder whether Caputo is as much an enemy of traditional conceptuality as he earlier seemed. Is his position one that in his own terms merely involves shielding God or the Godhead from the glaring light of metaphysical conceptuality? Such a viewpoint would be more in line with classical Thomism, and more satisfactory for a Thomist. Yet it would not be not completely satisfactory. For a Thomist would vigorously deny that metaphysical conceptuality attempts to place God in a glaring light; but let that pass. "Radical hermeneutics," Caputo writes, "arises only at the point of breakdown and loss of meaning, the withdrawal and dissemination of meaning, in short, the thunderstorm";¹⁸ and he adds that radical hermeneutics involves "coming to deal with this loss of meaning by confronting the meaning of the loss, of the withdrawal, of the *lethe* itself."¹⁹ It entails "the particular way one has found of remaining open to the mystery and venturing out into the flux."²⁰

Are Caputo and radical hermeneutics, then, relatively traditional

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 268-69.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 271.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰*Ibid.*

after all--just a vigorous effort to point out in a clear manner the limitations of our concepts, and to caution us against believing that we get a firm grip upon God through them? Do then some of his earlier statements about meteorological illusions and transitory concepts have to be interpreted as expressions of this effort? To this one must finally conclude in the negative. For in the end, what is beyond our concepts turns out for Caputo not necessarily to be God. In the end we are warned that we can never be absolutely sure what is beyond our concepts. Caputo indicates that in regards to this beyond or this abyss, as he occasionally calls it, our conceptual schemes can never give us assured knowledge. He writes: "What is calling to us from that abyss? Whose voice is it? Or is it no voice at all but the rumble of the cosmos in its endless transformations...."²¹ Later he writes: "I do not think that we know whether we believe in God or not, not if we face the cold truth";²² and towards the end we find him saying:

All this talk about the abyss and dark nights is not supposed to be a midnight metaphysics, or a *theologia negativa*, but a way of awakening to the flux and hence of staying in play with oneself.... And what is playing in the play? Is it God? the soul? the world?...*Dilige, et quod vis fac.*²³

In other words, this final chapter is speaking of openness to the mystery which might be God, but which might not be God; and whatever it is, one thing seems sure and that is that for Caputo we can never be certain of knowing what it is. We have then in Caputo's final chapter no traditional philosophical theology. Such an endeavor seems for Caputo to be impossible. Maritain would, I am sure, be quite critical of all this, though as with so many others whom he criticized in the interests of truth, he would also be interested and intrigued by such developments. He would also, I am certain, consider human reason to have been seriously shortchanged by Caputo's analysis; and he would finally without doubt have concluded that to the extent to which such thinking expands its influence the future of civilization will be impoverished.

²¹*Ibid.*, 286.

²²*Ibid.*, 288.

²³*Ibid.*, 293.