

*Always the Metaphysician:  
Maritain's Ontology  
of Anti-Racism*

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In this essay, I wish to examine three crucial ways in which the concept of essence underpins Maritain's critique of anti-Semitism. The first way pertains to his embrace of the philosopher's commitment to give public witness to the truth. The second pertains to his argument for human equality. The third pertains to his claim that members of a backward culture can develop their human capacities to equal or even surpass the members of an advanced culture. Although the three are tied together by their reference to the concept of essence, the first seems thematically different from the second and third. Yet, as I hope will become clear in the unfolding of this essay, the first way bears an intrinsic relation to the other two. For the intellectual transcendence of political, ideological, and practical projects, which makes the philosopher's witness crucial to society, both leads into and flows from the very object of rational discourse that defeats the claims of racism. Thus, especially today, when the dubious mandates of political correctness threaten to subordinate all intellectual inquiry to vested practical interests, the connection these three ways have in Maritain's thought is both timely and important.

*The Philosopher's Social Mission*

The philosopher's public witness to the truth is a venerable tradition; its most illustrious figure is, beyond all doubt, Socrates, who

did not flinch in his decision to accept execution rather than compromise his mission as “gadfly” of Athens. Participation in that tradition requires not only courage but intellectual integrity. F. H. Bradley’s rhapsodic claim that the Absolute shines forth in the dust and dirt of things notwithstanding, the descent from theory to practice remains defiantly precarious: however hard won, theory is neat and tidy, but the practical world of human events is nothing if not messy and unpredictable. Nothing in Maritain’s life suggests that he lacked courage; activism was in his blood as well as in his early environment.<sup>1</sup> When he delivered his 1938 public lecture in Paris on anti-Semitism (later amplified and published as *A Christian Looks at the Jewish Question*<sup>2</sup>), members of the audience heckled him and the next day the Rightist press pilloried him for his criticism of Hitler’s policies toward the Jews.<sup>3</sup> Still, his wife’s memoirs reveal that, as a young philosopher, he resisted for some time the call to turn his philosophical attention to practical matters; his intellectual passion was for speculative philosophy—metaphysics and epistemology, in that order.<sup>4</sup>

Another reason for his reluctance to enter the domain of practical philosophy was the fear of compromising his philosophical integrity, an uncertainty of how to reconcile the detachment and objectivity required for the pursuit of truth with the demands of action. Surely he

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<sup>1</sup>His wife’s account of their first meeting while both were students at the Sorbonne is a case in point.

I was leaving M. Matruchot’s plant physiology class one day in a rather downcast frame of mind, when I saw coming toward me a young man with a gentle face, a heavy shock of blond hair, a light beard and a slightly stoop-shouldered carriage. He introduced himself and said he was forming a committee of students to start a movement of protest among French writers and university people against the ill-treatment to which Russian Socialist students had been subject in their own country. (At that time in Russia there were student riots which were severely repressed by the Czarist police.) And he asked me to join this committee. Such was my first meeting with Jacques Maritain.

The activity of this committee consisted in soliciting the signatures of representatives of French intellectual life for a letter of protest which Jacques was to deliver, and did in fact deliver, to the Russian Embassy. Thus I went with him to call upon many celebrities whose names I have now forgotten; not that they are no longer famous, but that I can no longer remember exactly to whom the committee then sent me. We obtained a great number of signatures and letters. The precious file of these autographs has since disappeared.

See Raïssa Maritain, *We Have Been Friends Together and Adventures in Grace*, trans. Julie Kernan (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), 41.

<sup>2</sup>Jacques Maritain, *A Christian Looks at the Jewish Question* (New York: Arno Press, 1973).

<sup>3</sup>Helen Iswolsky, *Light Before Dusk* (New York: Longman’s, Green and Co., 1942), 197.

<sup>4</sup>Raïssa Maritain, *We Have Been Friends*, 353.

could not have been unaware of the dichotomy in the dual admiration he entertained, as a student at the Sorbonne, for Spinoza, the intellectualist *par excellence*, and Nietzsche, the anti-intellectualist vitalist *par excellence*.<sup>5</sup> But his most pressing reservations seem to have been put to rest when he wrote his 1935 *Lettre sur l'Indépendance* to repudiate Charles Maurras and the *Action Française*.

The *Lettre* sets the boundaries for the philosopher's address of practical issues. The philosopher, *as philosopher*, must stay clear of partisan politics. To preserve his intellectual independence, he must avoid offering political support for any political party. But to the extent that these parties adopt platforms that imply judgments on such things as the nature and destiny of man, freedom, rights, and justice, they are fair game for the philosopher's critique, regardless of their political stripe.<sup>6</sup> Even so, a temptation that always dogs the philosopher is the fear that to be effective, he must abandon his speculative commitment and convert his philosophical principles into tools for political action. But what the philosopher needs are not truths that will serve him but a Truth that he may serve.<sup>7</sup> Years later, Maritain would reaffirm the power of speculative truth; by giving public witness that the philosopher serves as a beacon for society.<sup>8</sup>

### *Maritain's Critique of Anti-Semitism*

How does Maritain's public response to anti-Semitism square with the above criteria? To be sure, *A Christian Looks at the Jewish Question* is cast in theological and socio-cultural terms. Only once in that work does he engage in anything close to philosophical discourse, where he addresses the question of the evidential basis for the anti-Semite's claim that the Jews constitute a race apart from the rest of humanity:

The truth is that the Jews are not a race in the biological sense of the word . . . Eminent scientists have concluded that in man's present historic stage, the idea of race corresponds to no anatomical-physiological reality,

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 63.

<sup>6</sup>Jacques Maritain, *Lettre sur L'Indépendance* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1936), 8–9.

<sup>7</sup>Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), 4.

<sup>8</sup>Jacques Maritain, *On the Use of Philosophy: Three Essays* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961), 14–15.

to no unity of 'blood', but merely to types of 'mentalities' produced by historic and social conditions. Its significance rests on extremely complex historical factors (of a psycho-ethico-sociological character), formed in the course of time rather than on hereditary characteristics transmitted by blood. Not that one need deny the existence of such characteristics, nor the importance of such a science as genetics, and of such a psycho-physical basis as blood. But these biological characteristics have been strongly intermixed in the ethnic brews compounded in the course of centuries, and in any case they are only a material element absolutely unqualified to constitute by itself a criterion of human value and sufficient to rupture the rigorous unity of the human family. Scientifically, racism seems chiefly a sort of political misappropriation of anthropology, mobilized to furnish a practical criterion of the German national community.<sup>9</sup>

Maritain adds that, philosophically speaking, the claim that the Jewish race is *sui generis* stands as "one of the worst materialist mockeries of man" and labels a "philosophical absurdity" the 1933 Nuremberg pronouncement that there is "a greater gap between the lowest forms which are still called human and our superior races, than between the lowest of men and the highest of monkeys."<sup>10</sup> That nothing in this riposte constitutes a philosophical argument against anti-Semitism should not be surprising, given that it comes out of a work intended to reach a wide audience, to bolster the Jews and to rally the Christians of Europe to stand firm against racism. Still, it does have a philosophical source from which it can be said to flow, as can be seen from Maritain's writings on human equality and essence.

### *Human Equality*

In a remarkable essay, "Human Equality,"<sup>11</sup> written in the late 1930s under the growing shadow of Nazism, Maritain unmaskes the philosophical basis of racism; to wit, empiricism. He makes it clear at the outset that the empiricists whom he associates with racism are not "Bacon, Locke, or John Stuart Mill, but rather cheap Nietzschean, Machiavellianist, rightist-Hegelian or rightist-positivist leaders of

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<sup>9</sup>Jacques Maritain, *A Christian Looks at the Jewish Question*, 21

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup>Jacques Maritain, "Human Equality" in *Ransoming the Time*, trans. Harry Lorin Binsse (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), 1-32.

modern politics.”<sup>12</sup> The reason for this disclaimer is that the racism that concerns him in this essay is the politically rather than the philosophically oriented variety, and the “pseudo-logic” of the former is not disinterested. Its sap of life is “collective pride,” “the instinct for domination and cruelty,” “hardened hearts,” and “the tendency to exalt one’s own strength by bringing others into submission.”<sup>13</sup> Still, he does not absolve philosophical empiricism from complicity, as is clear from the essay’s focus on the respective ontologies behind racism and human equality. Elsewhere he had already anticipated the ontological connection between empiricism and racism.<sup>14</sup> Having reduced all knowledge to sensation, empiricist philosophy has no recourse but to deny the reality of essence and embrace the doctrine of nominalism: all that exists in the world are individuals; universals, such as human nature, are but inventions of the mind. And because a sensationalist epistemology can distinguish things from each other only on the basis of data that pertain to the physical properties of things, these properties thus become the criteria for defining and assessing the value of things. In “Human Equality,” Maritain traces the implications for human beings. The natural inequalities among men—intelligence, strength, talent, health, etc.—are manifest and, if taken as the whole reality of man, become the ultimate basis of differentiation.<sup>15</sup>

And they must be taken as the whole in empiricist philosophy because the equality or common nature of men is grounded in essence and the latter, not being a physical property or congeries of physical properties, can be grasped only by the intellect:

The empiricist makes no mistake in thinking that there are, and inevitably must be, individual inequalities between men. His error rather consists in seeing and stating this only and in practice deeming as nothing the reality and the ontological dignity of that nature or essence which all men have in common, and which is perceived by the intellect with the help of the senses, and by transcending the senses.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 2.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 7.

<sup>14</sup>Jacques Maritain, *An Introduction to Philosophy*, trans. E. I. Watkin (London & New York: Sheed & Ward, 1959), 173–74; also, Maritain, “The Cultural Import of Empiricism,” in *From an Abundant Spring*, edited by the staff of *The Thomist* (New York, 1952), 451.

<sup>15</sup>Yves R. Simon, *The Philosophy of Democratic Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 197–200. Revised edition (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).

<sup>16</sup>Jacques Maritain, *Ransoming the Time*, 4.

Thus it is the human inequalities that recommend themselves, first and last, to the empiricist's attention. As noted previously, empiricism is in principle nominalistic. By reducing all knowledge to sensation, so that ideas are no more than copies of sensations, the empiricist is committed to one of two positions: either essences, for example, triangularity, man, etc., are not real in that they do not exist outside the mind, are not in existent things; or if they do exist in things, we cannot know them as they are since our knowledge is limited to sensible properties and their various combinations.<sup>17</sup> Here Maritain notes an ironic twist of logic whereby the nominalist implicitly embraces essentialism. There is no possibility of living as a pure nominalist or empiricist. The human mind categorizes and generalizes of necessity, so that these inequalities become not only the basis of differentiation, they are inflated to such an extent as to assume the status of general classes or categories. From there it is an easy step to the supposition that the different races of men are, in effect, different species, and superior and inferior species at that:

False hierarchies of pseudo-specific gradations which establish between men inequalities in the same order as those which apply to a lion and an ass, an eagle and an ant, thus arise as an ideological system whereby men justify the implacable hardening of already given inequalities, or the creation of new ones.<sup>18</sup>

The racist, to be sure, goes beyond inequalities between individuals to those between groups of human individuals. Just as Maritain acknowledges the inequalities between individuals, so he acknowledges them between groups of individuals, but notes that their occurrence in the latter instances stem from more complex causes than in the former. And just as with the inequalities between individual men, the inequalities between groups of men are accidental rather than essential. The groupings of human individuals in various societies is an historical event and, as such, has its explanation as much in a cluster of accidental circumstances as in a common biological and ethnic heritage.

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<sup>17</sup>David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Biggie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), bk. one, sec. vii, 17–20; John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (Peru, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Co., 1925), 202 ff.

<sup>18</sup>Jacques Maritain, *Ransoming the Time*, 4–5.

These accidental conditions produce inequalities that Maritain penetratingly describes as pertaining to “aggregations (collective wholes) and to average values, not to species and essential values.”<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, these groupings enjoy no more than a relative stability. A lower group can evolve to superior status. Although inferior in some human qualities (“participating to a lesser degree in certain resources of the human capital”), it can boast superiority in other human qualities (“more greatly participate in other resources of that capital”).<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the boundaries that differentiate groups of men are negotiable. Because they pertain to aggregations rather than species, these inequalities cannot be said to pertain to every member of the group with the kind of necessity that specific inequalities pertain to each member of the species:

An ant is essentially incapable of doing what an eagle does and of arriving at the same perfection. But a given child, born in an African tribe, can, if it receives a suitable education, become more intelligent, learned, and virtuous than another child born in a European nation; a given slave can be better and wiser than his master; a given blind deaf-mute can acquire a culture and intellectual breadth superior to those of some men endowed at birth with all the senses. . . . [P]rimitive and civilized man both participate, to a different degree and with different proportions, in the common virtues possible to mankind; and if the one exemplifies more particularly the daylight riches of the human intelligence, the other exemplifies more particularly the twilight riches of the human imagination and the human instinct. Animals will always be superior to vegetables, but the industrial bourgeoisie can replace the feudal nobility in the leadership of society, and a coloured population can become, if historic circumstances lend themselves thereto, superior to a white population in its qualities of civilization.<sup>21</sup>

### *Reflections on Maritain's Critique of Racism*

The above critique can be encapsulated in the following propositions:

1. The racist doctrine that the human races differ from each other,

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 5-6.

as species differ from each other, and that there are higher and lower human races, as there are higher and lower species, is false.

2. While the differences that distinguish human individuals from each other are both real and important, all human beings are equally human.
3. The different levels of culture that demarcate human groups indicate aggregations of human beings resulting from accidental historical circumstances.
4. Individual members of a lower culture can, given better circumstances, equal or excel in intelligence and achievement individual members of a higher culture.

These propositions imply three others that are crucial to their defensibility:

5. There is a *unity* of human nature.
6. There is a *plurality* of human beings.
7. Human nature is at once *fixed* and *dynamic*.

If five and six are mutually compatible, that can only be because there is a midcourse between extreme realism and nominalism. The opposition between realism and nominalism revolves around the ontological status of universals: Do they exist outside the mind or in the mind only? Extreme or absolute realists, like Plato, maintain the former; nominalists, like Hume, maintain the latter. From the standpoint of extreme realism propositions five and six are mutually incompatible because, if human nature itself is a self-subsisting reality, as Plato supposed, then that is all that could be human; individual humans would, at best, be shadows of the universal, *man*. To illustrate, imagine that *whiteness* existed in itself. Clearly, there could then only be one whiteness; and although there could be many *white* things, they would be limited, imperfect instances of whiteness. But Maritain rejects extreme realism because it makes illusory the data of our external senses, namely, that the world is populated by individual things.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Jacques Maritain, *Introduction to Philosophy*, esp. 119–21. For a fuller account of Maritain's view of the relation of essences to things, see his *Existence and the Existent*, trans. Lewis Galantieri and Gerald B. Phelan (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1957), chaps. 1 and 3.

From the standpoint of nominalism, assertions 5 and 6 are mutually incompatible, for to say that all human beings are essentially the same is to posit as real a universal human nature; but that would fly in the face of our experiential knowledge, which tells us that the world is populated only by individuals. Nominalists, like Hume, maintain that what exists outside the mind are only concrete, individual things and that universals are merely labels fabricated by the mind to unify, for purposes of classification, individuals that bear some relevant property in common. But Maritain rejects nominalism because, by denying the intelligible structure in individual things, and with it their unifying principle, intellectual knowledge, including science, becomes impossible.<sup>23</sup>

For Maritain assertions five and six are mutually compatible because unity and plurality are mutually compatible concepts, and the latter are so because he embraces a *moderate* realism. Its ontological ground is found in the solution advanced by Thomistic philosophy to the problem of universals: an analysis of the concept of essence reveals nothing that says that it must be either universal or particular. What determines whether it must be one or the other is its ontological status: one thing exists in another thing according to the conditions of the latter. Essence in a concrete thing (*in re*) is particular; essence, as known, that is, existing in the intellect of the knower (*in mente*) is

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<sup>23</sup>Maritain's rejection of both extreme realism and nominalism is, it will be noted, based on an appeal to two "common sense" principles: (1) What exist in the world are concrete individual entities, not ideas or abstractions; (2) We can attain an intellectual, and hence scientific and philosophical, knowledge of these things, which means that they must embody intelligible, unifying principles—essences.

Two points must be made regarding this appeal to common sense. First, Maritain does not have in mind the naive common sense of Thomas Reid and the Scottish School, which he rejects, but rather what he calls "Critical Reason." The latter's platform is that "We know; what we know are things; and we know that we know things." It belongs to philosophy to critically assess its principles, including its presuppositions; yet a critique of knowledge presupposes that we know things.

Second, Maritain's critical realism stands in the tradition of Aristotelian-Thomistic realism, otherwise known as the *philosophia perennis*. This tradition maintains that, rather than being at odds with common sense, philosophy grows out of the spontaneous principles of common sense, such as that things exist independently of our experience of them, cause and effect operate in nature, and all things and events have a sufficient reason for their being, etc. All these principles are grounded in being, that which is, in that all things are ways of being, and all our knowledge accordingly implies the judgment, "Being is." Thus common sense, to which Maritain subscribes, is an implicit knowledge of being and its principles. See, Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, chap. 3, sec. 1–6, 71–84, and *Introduction to Philosophy*, part 1, chap. 8.

universal. Clearly, the idea of an individual human being, for example, Socrates, is the idea of a particularized essence; but to know it as a particular *man* presupposes a grasp of the abstract essence *manness* or *humanness*, and that is to know the essence *man* as a universal.<sup>24</sup> The basis of the unity and, therefore, equality of all human beings is that all men possess human nature (essence). Accordingly, human nature transcends all differences found in human beings, whether they be racial, ethnic, or differences in health, wealth, intelligence, or social status.<sup>25</sup> Consider, for example, “man” defined as “rational animal.” An analysis of this definition reveals that none of these concepts forms part of the concept *man*.

While accidental properties, such as intelligence, health, physical characteristics, and skin pigmentation, admit of degrees—some people are more intelligent than others, some have darker skin than others, essence does not admit of degrees; no one can be more or less a human being than someone else. Since essence is the ontological component that determines *what* a being is and since the preeminent dignity that belongs to members of the human race is conferred by their essence, and since essence does not admit of degrees, it follows that all human beings possess a preeminent dignity and that no human being possesses more or less of that dignity than any other human being. As noted above, the unity of human nature is entirely compatible with racial and individual human differences. To be a human being is not to cease being an African-American or Socrates.

### *The Permanence and Dynamism of Essence*

Perhaps the most striking assertion of the seventh, that essence is at once permanent and dynamic, for it undergirds the proposition that a given member of a primitive culture can equal or even surpass in intellectual and other accomplishments a given member of a higher culture. Although susceptible of prosaic interpretations, the latter proposition is nevertheless important to any compelling repudiation of racism since advocates of racial superiority inevitably cite the inability of

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<sup>24</sup>Saint Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, trans. with introduction and notes by Armand Maurer, C.S.B. (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1968), chap. II, secs. 4 and 5, 36–38.

<sup>25</sup>Simon, *Democratic Government*, 202–3.

the members of the “inferior race” to perform on a level comparable to members of the “superior race.”

The dynamic aspect of essence unfolds itself from within the permanent aspect. It is important to emphasize this relationship because the racist argument depends upon an arbitrarily chosen battleground. The capacity of one man to “measure up” to another, let alone the actual measuring up, is not itself what constitutes human equality. To say otherwise would be to accept the racist’s battle plan insofar as he bases his claims for a “master/slave race” on the disparity of actual properties and ready abilities that separate the individual members of the various human groups. It is the essence *man* itself that establishes the unity, and therefore, the dignity of all men.

### *Essence as Real and Ideal*

Only in the sense that the dynamic aspect of essence indicates an already existing actuality can it serve as evidence for human equality: potency presupposes act. A rose seed has the potency to be a rose bush because of what it already actually is. If nominalism bedevils the empiricist’s understanding of the unity of human nature, what bedevils the rationalist’s understanding of its dynamism is the failure to understand that the genus essence has two major species: *formal definition* and *nature*.<sup>26</sup> The essence of a mathematical entity, such as a triangle, belongs to the species of formal definition. *Triangularity* is static and unchangeable; it neither comes into existence nor passes out of existence. That is why there is no efficient or final causality but only formal causality in mathematics. Specific statements and entities, such as right angles, can be deduced from the concept of triangularity, but that is only because they are formally present in its essence. And a triangle drawn on the blackboard can be said to have come into existence at time 1 and, when erased, can be said to have gone out of existence at time 2. But that is because the drawing is a physical representation of *triangularity*; it is not itself *triangularity*.

Essence, as *a nature*, tells a different tale. An actual rose seed can grow into an actual rose bush, and it can do so, not because the latter is formally contained in the former, but just because it possesses *a*

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<sup>26</sup>Yves R. Simon, *The Tradition of Natural Law*, ed. Vukan Kuic (New York: Fordham University Press, 1967), 41–50. Revised edition (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992).

*nature*, an inborn dynamic striving for fulfillment. Granted, since no constituent part is added anywhere in the morphological process by which the seed becomes a bush, it must be said that, in a real and important sense, the rose bush was in the seed from the beginning, so that, in a real and important sense, the rose seed is the rose bush. The sense in which these assertions are true is this: what the seed actually is *by nature* confers on it the capacity to be something other than it now is. Thus the rose bush is not formally already in the seed; it is rather a real potency grounded in the actuality of what the seed is.

But nothing develops *in vacuo*. Because all development is a dynamic interaction between the thing's nature and the environment, the rose seed's potency to become a rose bush requires the proper external causes. Thus, whereas the concept *right angle* is already there, albeit only formally, in the concept of *triangularity*, the rose bush is not already there in the rose seed in that sense. Only in the proper environment can the seed's potency to be a rose bush be actualized. If the individual seed is defective, then not even in the most auspicious environment will it grow into a fully formed rose bush. Equally, if the seed is normal but its environment is lacking, the seed's potential cannot be actualized, at least not to the normal extent.

In this regard, what is true for subhuman beings is true for humans. The distinctive human faculties, such as understanding, require social interaction for their development. Cultural poverty, frequently the accompaniment of economic poverty, will stifle intellectual development. Here it is not necessary to enter the controversies surrounding the interpretation of sociological data regarding the academic performance of the various ethnic groups in the United States. And this for two reasons. First, given that the essences of real human beings are *natures*, the former are dynamic rather than static; accordingly, those, like Maritain, who subscribe to the moderate realism of Thomism, can argue, as he has, that actually existing humans possess potentials for the continuous development of their faculties. Second, as Maritain has observed, racial groups, rather than constituting respectively distinctive species, each essentially different from the other, constitute instead "aggregations" or "collective wholes." If the members of each group display a distinctive level of intellectual performance or kind of ethico-social behavior, that, like distinctive physical characteristics shared by the members of a given group, can be attributed to contingent historical circumstances and not to essential characteristics. The commitment of democratic societies to establish justice for all entails

not only the protection of individual freedom but the guarantee of equality of opportunity as well, and the latter means the guarantee of a universal basic minimum of socio-economic conditions. If Prussia, where Immanuel Kant was born as the son of a humble saddler, had not introduced the enlightened policy of an equal academic education for all males regardless of social status, the author of *The Critique of Pure Reason* most likely would have spent his days making saddles without ever wondering about the possibility of a priori synthetic judgments.

### *The Dynamism of Knowledge*

The question of the social perception of racially and ethnically different peoples cannot be left out of the discussion. Not only is there a dynamism of human nature, there is also a dynamism in the knowledge of that nature. The moderate realism of the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, which Maritain espouses, holds that we gain our knowledge of extramental reality through our sensorial perception of concrete, particular things. Having to abstract the latter's intelligible content from the obstructions posed by their material embodiments requires our encounter with many particular things. Along the way, the influences of imagination and emotion must be reckoned with, since these faculties harbor associations that can distort our interpretation of concepts and perceptions. For example, the perception of a member of a different ethnic group can evoke fear or hatred depending on how members of that group are typically represented by society. One ploy of racist propaganda is to depict the distinctive facial characteristics of despised groups in such exaggerated fashion as to suggest subhuman or, at best, Neanderthal, family affiliations. This caricature will succeed to the extent that the desired images and feelings can be transmitted to the observer with such force as to supplant clear ideas and judgments grounded in the evidence of one's straightforward perception of human beings. A classic instance is the manner in which Hitler's propaganda films in the 1930s depicted the Jews as fawning opportunists, smaller and less robust than the "Aryans," and noticeably unhygienic, in order to further inflame public sentiment against the Semitic community. These infelicitous associations can also affect the self-perception of the racist's victims. The individual members of society inevitably become microcosms of the values and worldview embodied in its institutions and laws. Expressions such as "self-hating Jew" and "Uncle Tom Black" indicate how an individual member

of a despised group can internalize and come to accept the social stereotypes of his race or ethnicity.<sup>27</sup>

Here it will be useful to borrow Maritain's distinction between "ontological" and "gnoseological."<sup>28</sup> The former refers to *what* a human being really is, that is, to his essence. The latter refers to *how* that essence is perceived at any given historical period. If historical circumstances are kind enough to allow the formation of the right socio-cultural conditions, as, in fact, happened in the West, then a people can attain an ever clearer and more objective understanding of the nature of man and thus of human equality. In other words, the *gnoseological* will increasingly mirror the *ontological*. But, as Maritain has shown in "Human Equality," such conditions will not come about, and surely will not endure, without the rational support of a philosophy that harmonizes with the real world. Specifically, it must be a moderate realism, which alone can account for the *unity* and *plurality* of man because it is able to reconcile essence *as particular* and essence *as universal*.

### Conclusion

Plato's *Republic* shines forth as the first and most eloquent argument for a philosophical and a specifically metaphysical rationale for the just political society. To use the soaring prose of the Jowett translation, that argument is summed up in the famous line, "Until philosophers become kings or kings philosophers, there can be no hope for society."<sup>29</sup> Maritain's writings over the years have testified to his acceptance of

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<sup>27</sup>William H. Grier and Price, M. Cobbs, *Black Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969), 53. The thesis of this book, written by two African-American psychiatrists, is that before the therapist can treat the emotional problems an African-American patient has incurred as an individual, it is necessary to treat the problems he has incurred as an African-American living in a white society. "He an [African-American] patient was held back by some inner command not to excel, not to achieve, not to become outstanding, not to draw attention to himself. Even at the price of achievement, he felt bound to follow a command to remain anonymous," 61. And of another patient, the authors write, "It developed that he was afraid to compete with white men as a writer. Whatever he wrote, his obsessional fears dictated that somewhere someone who was white had written something better. He was a defeated and despairing man when he entered treatment."

<sup>28</sup>Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Phoenix Books, 1966), 85–90.

<sup>29</sup>Plato, *The Republic V*, 474 in *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett (New York: Random House, 1937), vol. 1, 737.

this ethos.<sup>30</sup> I have tried to show in this essay that his reliance on the moderate realist theory of essence in his ripostes to anti-Semitism in particular and racism in general is a case in point, and for three reasons. First, because the essence, *man*, transcends all political, ideological, and practical agendas, Maritain was able to address a public issue, *as philosopher*, which is to say, to give public witness to the truth about human equality and dignity while preserving philosophical objectivity and intellectual independence. Second, by appealing to the theory of essence, he was able to advance a rational defense for the unity of man and against the racist claim that the races of man differ from each other as different species. Third, his understanding of the essences of natural things as *natures* and thus as both permanent and dynamic furnishes the ontological foundation for his frontal attack on the racist's appeal to the "inferior" cultural and behavioral life of the despised human groups. As I noted at the outset, this triple rationale could not be more needed today, given the prevalence of efforts to intimidate intellectuals, by sanctimonious appeals to political correctness, into sacrificing their sworn allegiance to intellectual objectivity and independence, on the altar of the politically expedient.

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<sup>30</sup>See, for example, *Man and the State*, chap. 4, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, chap. 1, and *Scholasticism and Politics*, chaps. 1–4, and 7.