

# ***Becoming Oneself: Maritain on Liberal Education***

**Anne M. Wiles**

As the values of an increasingly materialistic society are more and more reflected in institutions of higher learning, we need to remind ourselves of the nature and purpose of liberal education, a purpose that Jacques Maritain so clearly articulates, an education the value of which Maritain himself is an exemplar *par excellence*.

As teacher, philosopher, and disciple of Aristotle and Aquinas, Maritain thought and wrote extensively about education. From the early work, *Education at the Crossroads*<sup>1</sup> through his latest works *On the Church of Christ*<sup>2</sup> and *The Peasant of the Garonne*,<sup>3</sup> his concern for the education of the person is evident.

Even Maritain's theoretical works, for example, *Man and the State*,<sup>4</sup> *The Degrees of Knowledge*,<sup>5</sup> and *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*<sup>6</sup> have

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

2. Jacques Maritain, *On the Church of Christ* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973).

3. Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968).

4. Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1951).

5. Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959).

6. Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953).

at their core an interest in the perfection of the person through love and knowledge, i.e., in liberal education.

Maritain's writings on education range from the practical to the metaphysical. In *Education at the Crossroads*, he examines the practical aspects of education in the schools of America and Europe during the crises of the Second World War and its aftermath, and he makes specific recommendations for the practice of education at various levels, including the undergraduate college curriculum.<sup>7</sup> In the same work, as a foundation for these curricular recommendations, he articulates a philosophy of education that centers on the nature of man and the nature of education.<sup>8</sup> Although Maritain never abandons the fundamental principles he sets out in this early work, his later writings add depth and nuance not explicit in the earlier articulation. Concerning the aims of education, Maritain observes that, "the prime goal of education is the conquest of internal and spiritual freedom to be achieved by the individual person...."<sup>9</sup> This quotation gives rise to two interrelated questions that form the structural framework of this essay: What is the nature of the human person? And, in what way does education liberate the person?

### **What is the Nature of the Human Person?**

There are no doubt multiple and complex reasons for the widespread and largely modern view that human intelligence differs only in degree and not in kind from intelligence in an orangutan. The view is so well entrenched that to raise doubt about the validity and scope of one of its main supports—Darwinian evolutionism—is to invite the criticism implicit in the labels, "reactionary," "unscientific," "fundamentalist," or "creationist," even, perhaps especially, from non-philosophical scientists.

Empiricism and materialism, sometimes quixotically coupled with epistemological relativism or, more often, with a thoroughgoing skepticism about the ability of the human mind to know any "absolute" truths, provide the epistemological and metaphysical basis for the claim that human intelligence does not differ essentially from animal intelligence. The confusion reflected in this position is partly a result of the illegitimate extension of "scientific method" to areas where the method is inappropriate and inadequate (i.e., to the rise of scientism), but the root cause of the errors

7. Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, pp. 64-84.

8. *Ibid.*, pp.1-28.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

concerning human nature and the distinctiveness of human intelligence, as well as of scientism itself, is an inadequate philosophical or liberal education and the resultant self-perpetuating ignorance bolstered by Cartesian, Humean, Kantian and pragmatic theories of truth and knowledge.

The Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition provides a means to correct these errors, including conceptual tools for making the appropriate distinctions, and an epistemology adequate to accommodate truths other than the merely scientific. Moreover, those steeped in the western classical tradition, beginning with Homer, have an extraordinarily rich literature which testifies by its existence and content that humans are more than animal, and, while far less than God, are yet something divine.

The scientific view of man finds early expression in Descartes' mechanistic view; the humanistic view is expressed in the philosophical perspective of Aristotle and Aquinas. The purely scientific idea of man emphasizes measurable and observable data without considering essence or being. This view avoids such questions as: does man possess free will which allows self-direction, or is he determined by psychological and social factors over which he has no control? On the other hand, the philosophical idea of the human person is an ontological idea, "not entirely verifiable in sense-experience, though it possesses criteria and proofs of its own, and it deals with the essential and intrinsic, though not visible or tangible characters, and with the intelligible density of that being we call man."<sup>10</sup> The purely scientific idea of man has no reference to ultimate reality and thus cannot provide the fundamental principle necessary for human education, namely, an adequate ontological account of the nature and *telos* of the human person. Distinguishing the nature of the human being from that of other animals is not merely a theoretic or purely academic matter; it is of central and controlling importance if education is to be something other than the training of an animal for the utility of the state.

A human person does not exist merely as a physical being, but as one who has a richer and nobler existence through knowledge and love. Although dependent on the slightest accident of matter, the human person yet has a wholeness, independence and integrity that is formed by the substantial, integral union of spirit or soul with a material dimension. "It is this mystery of our nature," Maritain notes, "which religious thought designates when it says that the person is the image of God."<sup>11</sup> Education is

10. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

primarily concerned with the person, not with the material individual *per se*, which, nonetheless, cannot be ignored.

The Aristotelian-Thomistic understanding of human nature, clarified by Maritain, reveals the inadequacies of a purely materialistic, naturalistic, or animalistic conception of human nature. It also counters the tendency to treat others as disembodied intellects, or bundles of emotions. A smile is more than the expansion of the lips. Cheshire cats, present or not, don't smile and hyenas don't laugh. These activities belong to a universe of meaning, participation in which is open only to persons. Maritain makes clear that psychophysical habits, conditioned reflexes, sense memorization, etc., are related to the material individual, not to what is specifically or uniquely human. He marks this distinction in a memorable phrase, "Education is not animal training. The education of man is a human awakening."<sup>12</sup>

Some care must be taken here, for even activities referred to as "training," whether they be physical or mental, or the rudiments of etiquette and morals in children, are still *human* activities and as such, differ specifically from the training of a cat or monkey; such activities, "can be intrinsically improved and can outstrip their own immediate practical value through being *humanized* ... by understanding."<sup>13</sup> This implies, as a prelude to liberal education in the full sense, that even in early education, the dignity and promise of the child can be respected, for example, by providing an explanation that he or she can understand for any work required.<sup>14</sup> Preparation for liberal education begins in an appeal to reason that allows for autonomy appropriate to the age and circumstances of the child. The danger for the older student and the adult, is that the utilitarian aspect of education (i.e., job training) might, in the thinking of the prevalent culture, displace or overshadow the essential aim of a truly *liberal* education. As Maritain notes, "The overwhelming cult of specialization dehumanizes man's life."<sup>15</sup>

12. Ibid., p. 9.

13. Ibid., p.10.

14. I have a vivid recollection of my fourth grade teacher saying, "This year you will learn to take notes as someone speaks or reads. You will need this skill when you go to college." Though the readings were from American history, not of especial interest to at least one ten-year old girl, I was filled with desire to accomplish the skill. I suppose, in part, because I admired Miss Walden who represented in her person all that I imagined of adult womanhood and college—and because she said "when," not "if" you go to college. I do not know whether she had read Maritain, St. Thomas, or Aristotle, but in that one statement she recognized the dignity of her students as persons. She strengthened not only my skills, but also the expectation of my becoming what I could be.

15. Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, p.19.

## In What Way Does Education Liberate the Person? *Techné* and Wisdom

Heraclitus is reputed to have said that much learning does not make one wise. In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates distinguished between knowledge of a craft (*techné*) that the artisans he questioned did have, and wisdom, a perfection of the intellect they lacked. For his part, Aristotle identified three broad uses of the human intellect: 1) the productive use, directed towards the creation of some artifact, 2) the practical use, the purpose of which is to determine what should be done and what should be desired, and, 3) the speculative use, the *telos* or purpose of which is the discovery of truth for its own sake, and for no end beyond itself.<sup>16</sup>

The productive use of the intellect is necessarily directed toward and bound by the limitations of the external matter on which it works. The corresponding excellence is essentially a *techné* and is evidenced in the object produced. The excellence of the practical intellect, concerned with action and desire, remains within the person as a moral excellence or virtue. The intellect is most free in its speculative use since the sole object is truth, and it willingly follows wherever truth leads. The excellence of the speculative intellect is also a perfection of the person. Every perfection of the intellect is a good, but the Greek tradition places greater value on the practical and especially the speculative uses of the intellect with the resulting emphasis on the moral and intellectual virtues that are the perfections of these habits. Human perfection or happiness is activity in accordance with the moral and intellectual virtues. The good man is the happy man.

The essential aim of liberal education is based on the nature of the human person and his deep natural aspirations, the most fundamental of which, Maritain says, is the aspiration to freedom. By 'freedom,' Maritain does not mean "free-will;" he means "that freedom which is spontaneity, expansion or autonomy" of the person, and which we have to gain through constant effort and struggle."<sup>17</sup> Aristotle recognized the independence and freedom achieved by the exercise of the moral and intellectual virtues, but Maritain credits the Gospel with raising human perfection to an even higher level by showing that it consists also in the perfection of love. Setting out the main goal of education, Maritain embraces both the Greek and Christian views of the perfection of the person, "the prime goal of education is the

16. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1138 b18-1141 b27.

17. Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, p.11.

conquest of internal and spiritual freedom to be achieved by the individual person, or, in other words, his liberation through knowledge and wisdom, good will and love."<sup>18</sup>

The freedom of which Maritain speaks is not an aimless unfolding of potentialities. Spiritual activities are intentional, by nature tending towards an object that will measure and rule them, not by bondage, but by liberty.<sup>19</sup> The intellect searches for, and is freed by knowing truth; and, "truth does not depend upon us, but upon what is."<sup>20</sup>

In addition to the moral and intellectual virtues, the role and importance of intellectual intuition should not be underestimated. It, too, plays a vital part in a truly liberal education. Unfortunately, intuition, as a direct and immediate knowledge, has generally received a bad press among philosophers outside the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, especially following the radical empiricism of Hume. The failure to appreciate the role of intellectual intuition, even in respect to scientific knowledge, has resulted in a narrow understanding of truth, knowledge, and the process of learning and teaching. Consequently, the prevalent understanding of what liberal education is and how it should be engendered is also adversely affected.

Many university students today are exceedingly skeptical that there is such a thing as intuition as a process of the intellect that is reliable and productive of truth. Because they either have not read (or if they have read, have not understood) the classical western literature, they tend to think of intuition as some irrational "hunch," that is not really "scientific" and hence, not really knowledge. It should come as no surprise that students have and express these views since many of their professors in the modern university have not themselves enjoyed a truly liberal education and are also equally imbued with the attitude of scientism.

As Aristotle pointed out, the first principles of demonstration, necessary for scientific knowledge are known by intuition.<sup>21</sup> Since they are the starting points of demonstration, they cannot themselves be proved, yet they are not "irrational" or "merely assumed;" they are supportable by reason. One who understands such a principle recognizes it as self-evident. Examples of these principles are the principle of identity, of sufficient reason, and of finality; they are the principles that are presupposed by all of the sciences.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., p. 12.

21. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1140 b30-1141 a19.

That first principles can be identified and articulated is often rejected because the principles are taken too narrowly. First principles, known by intellectual intuition, are best thought of as formal principles that function as constraints on our thinking and action. The principle of non-contradiction, for example, acts as a formal constraint on what can be coherently thought and said. Unless such principles are recognized as self-evident, and, in the way described above, as directive of thinking, acting and willing, then neither truth, objective moral standards, nor a correct understanding of the nature and aims of education is possible. Misunderstanding the nature and importance of intellectual intuition, students often think an objective (absolute) moral standard is a statement on the order of "never lie," i.e., a statement with highly specified content. They also generally believe that statements verifiable by the scientific method are the best available model of "truth," and, since they accept that such "truths" may be false tomorrow, they consequently also think there are, in fact, no absolute truths, or at least none worth knowing. So what, if all men by nature desire to know? For them, knowledge is about information, not truth.

The other role of intuition that Aristotle identifies is the recognition of particulars as being instances of a certain kind or class.<sup>22</sup> This recognition, when articulated, may function as the minor premise of the so-called practical syllogism. For example, if one knows that "Red salmon is a healthful food one ought to eat" [major premise], to reach the conclusion, "Let me eat this salmon," one must know the minor premise, "This fish on my plate is red salmon." The minor premise is known by intuition, i.e., by recognizing that the fish is of a certain kind, namely, red salmon. Recognition of a particular as a certain kind occurs in or through sense perception, but is not itself a sense perception. It is a higher intellectual function requiring a conceptual framework, a universe of meaning.

In *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, Maritain draws attention to yet another role, or perhaps another type of intuition. Creative or poetic intuition arises from the preconscious life of the intellect. This spiritual preconscious is not the Freudian unconscious of instincts, repressed desire or images, and traumatic memories.<sup>23</sup> Rather, Maritain sees it as a spiritual or musical preconscious that underlies not only specifically mystical or aesthetic experiences, but also the ordinary and everyday function of intelligence as it understands or discovers something new. Drawing upon

22. Ibid., 1143 a32- b17.

23. Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, p. 40.

the Thomistic philosophy of human nature, Maritain depicts the spiritual unconscious or preconscious as a rich intellectual, though non-conceptual, activity involving the intellect, imagination and intuitive data from external sensation,<sup>24</sup> springing from “a root activity in which the intellect and the imagination, as well as the powers of desire, love, and emotion are engaged in common ... stirred and activated by the light of the Illuminating Intellect.”<sup>25</sup> Poetic knowledge (as Maritain uses the expression) grasps the nature of things and their interconnections through creative intuition or connatural knowledge. Since every person is capable of intellectual intuition, it is in this very apprehension that one has the potential to become aware of one’s own self. Poetic intuition may issue in and perfect an external work, though it need not. The spiritual activities of the will and the intellect, on the other hand, stay within and may perfect the person. Such activities are purposive and seek an object which will measure and rule them, spiritually, not by force, and thus the object loved or known may become a part of the loving and knowing person.<sup>26</sup>

Maritain characterizes human thinking as a vital energy of knowledge or spiritual intuition *into* and not *about* its objects. Such intuition is not confined to poetic knowledge, since all human thinking begins with insights and ends in insights “made true by rational proving or experimental verifying....”<sup>27</sup> As a result of this spiritual intuition, “... human thought is able to illumine experience, to realize desires which are human because they are rooted in the prime desire for unlimited good, and to dominate, control, and refashion the world. At the beginning of human action, insofar as it is human, there is truth, grasped or believed to be grasped for the sake of truth. Without trust in truth, there is no human effectiveness.”<sup>28</sup>

Liberal teaching and learning, tending as they do toward the perfection of the person require both love and knowledge, respect for the uniqueness of the person and for the universality of the truth. Truth is concerned with what *is*, not what the individual would like to *think* is. Maritain writes, “Truth is an infinite realm—as infinite as being—whose wholeness transcends infinitely our powers of perception, and each fragment of which must be grasped through vital and purified internal activity. This conquest of being, this progressive attainment of new truths, or the progressive realization of the ever-growing and ever-renewed significance of truths

24. Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, p. 94; also, see diagram on p. 108.

25. *Ibid.*, p.110.

26. Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, pp. 11-12.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

28. *Ibid.*

already attained, opens and enlarges our mind and life, and really situates them in freedom and autonomy".<sup>29</sup>

In the *Phaedo*, Plato emphasized that all learning takes place within the learner, through the activity of the learner. Respecting this fundamental truth about learning, the teacher, much like the physician, can only cooperate with nature. Both education and medicine are *ars cooperativa naturae*, arts of ministering and subservient to nature.<sup>30</sup> While both the mind's natural activity on the part of the student and the intellectual guidance of the teacher are dynamic factors in liberal education, Maritain notes that, "the principal agent in education, the primary dynamic factor or propelling force, is the internal vital principle in the one to be educated."<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, the teacher is a real cause and agent, "a real giver whose own dynamism, moral authority and positive guidance are indispensable."<sup>32</sup>

The teacher who would help another to "become what he is" must have "knowledge into," or love of, the absolute uniqueness of the other person. The uniqueness of the person, as a particular individual, is grasped by intuition. Intuition springs from what Maritain has termed the "preconscious of the spirit," and yet, since this preconscious is a rich mixture of what the person has read, thought, seen and experienced, it differs greatly from one person to another. One person may, by various means, help enrich the preconscious and conscious intelligence of another, and enrich himself at the same time, for example, by reading great literature together, visiting art galleries, seeing plays, opera, talking, traveling, etc. Finally, with reference to the "preconscious spiritual dynamism of human personality,"<sup>33</sup> one may aid in the liberal education of another by keeping in personal contact, for this gives to the "mysterious identity of the soul" the "comforting assurance of being recognized by a human personal gaze, inexpressible either in concepts or words."<sup>34</sup>

29. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 41. Maritain is here speaking of the relation between a teacher and pupil, but the point has general application. The exact quotation is: "It is with reference to this preconscious spiritual dynamism of human personality that keeping personal contact with the pupil is of such great import, not only as a better technique for making study more attractive and stimulating, but above all to give to that mysterious identity of the child's soul, which is unknown to himself, and which no techniques can reach, the comforting assurance of being in some way recognized by a human personal gaze, inexpressible either in concept or words."