
Jacques Maritain: A Believing Philosopher

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My collar justifies my beginning with a text. This evening that text is taken from the introductory words with which Professor Jacques Maritain gave his view of a youthful project on which he had come to entertain second thoughts:

La philosophie Bergsonienne was my first book; it was published forty years ago when I was young, and did not hesitate to rush in where angels feared to tread.¹

The unmistakable rustle you have just heard was the cautionary spreading of his wings by my guardian angel—as brakes to stop his flight. He fears understandably to join me in presuming to speak of Jacques Maritain to this distinguished reunion of the American Maritain Association.

Still, extenuating circumstances can be listed.

First, Professor Deal Hudson invited me; the Holy One, in his infinite mercy, will surely forgive him and, it is to be hoped, you will too.

Second, like many of you, but fewer as the years slip by, I knew Maritain and, what is more, he knew me—as you will hear.

Third, my supervisor when I was a student in Toronto, in dialectic a Greek of the Greeks, once skewered me in Socratic fashion on whether Maritain was a “philosopher” or a “theologian.” This evening, forty years later, it will be possible to nuance my answer, for on the face of it, I was wrong in making Maritain a theologian rather than a philosopher.

Fourth and last, if Aristotle is best interpreted “through Aristotle,” *Aristoteles per Aristotelem*, it will be possible and also acceptable to appeal to what Maritain has said and written in an effort to catch his intentions. Not one of us would be a member of this Association were we immune to the lure of this wise man.

1. “La Philosophie bergsonienne est mon premier livre. Il a paru voilà quarante ans, alors que j’étais jeune et que je n’hésiterais pas à foncer là où les anges craignent de s’aventurer,” *Jacques et Raïssa Maritain. Oeuvres complètes* (Paris/Fribourg: Editions universitaires/Editions saint-Paul, 1986), 1: 7; Maritain here cited Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*, Part 3, line 66.

Since my personal contacts with Professor Maritain were during my time as a graduate student in Toronto, it ought to be mentioned that from the early 1930s Étienne Gilson and his colleagues there had made strenuous efforts to attract him to the staff of the Institute of Mediaeval Studies. Those efforts enjoyed only limited success. He did visit and he gave the occasional lecture; he often advised graduate students on their dissertations. A kind of malevolent myth grew up on the campus that he and Gilson had frequently disagreed on the advice he had given. We new students were assured by the older ones that those disagreements had been acerbic. Maritain had spoken of a "critical realism" to the distress of Gilson; he promoted the notion of an "intuition of being" quite unacceptable to our Director of Studies. Some students, we were assured, had been delayed for years as they rewrote what Maritain had recommended and Gilson had deplored. No concrete case of such a nightmare for a graduate student was ever proffered. Truth to tell, the two great Frenchmen did not agree on everything but they knew how to disagree on a civilized plane.

One remembers, for instance, the lines of Gilson on Maritain's use of the expression "critical realism." True enough, Gilson thought the term an unfortunate one: "it would be better to say it differently," but this did not prevent his saying that what "the more perspicacious among them wish to say" coincided with his own favored expression "realism" without qualification, *réalisme tout court*.²

A day came when Maritain and Gilson met in the presence of us students. They were cordial, each obviously interested in the other's work. In contrast to the evidently robust Gilson, Maritain was fragile, delicate, elegant. His long scarf, worn in all weathers, was imposed by Raïssa; she was exercised lest he catch a cold or worse. Her fears and his absences . . . ?

We students who were also priests were welcome in the Basilian Fathers' Common Room and there someone introduced me to Professor Maritain. He inquired graciously about my work; on whom was I working? What sort of figure was that man? A year later some well-meaning Basilian introduced me to Maritain once more. "Oh yes," he said, "you are the one who is working on a fourteenth-century English logician." How much of Maritain was in that single sentence: his genuine interest in a doctoral candidate, met in casual circumstances a year before, his precise and retentive memory, his capacity to deal without awkwardness with one inferior to himself in scholarship and

2. " . . . les plus clairvoyants d'entre eux veulent dire . . . it vaudrait mieux le dire autrement," Etienne Gilson, *Réalisme thomiste et critique de la connaissance* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1947), p. 37.

fame and accomplishment, yet, in his view, a superior thanks to sacramental priesthood. For me the experience was flattering and humbling and memorable. Jacques Maritain had been a fabled name from my undergraduate time at Seton Hall College; no reader of *Commonweal* and *America* in those prewar years could fail to know both Maritain's name and his always striking stance, above all on the Civil War in Spain and on the worsening plight of Europe's Jews. Those who lived through those days will know how his stance was at odds with the common wisdom of so many and of such influential Catholic circles. My friends and I then thought him a saint and a savant, a living justification of our faith and of our nascent, limited, learning. Despite all that has happened since, I think we undergraduates were right in our estimate.

"All that has happened since"?

It would be fatuous to pretend that nothing has happened to Maritain and to his reputation in the years between. From an admitted "liberal" in the most positive sense of that ambiguous term, Maritain now represents what is widely thought of as excessively "conservative," as dated, in the common parlance of the days when I was young as "old hat."

One need not entertain a Chestertonian respect for the common parlance of the Common Man to concede that there is something to this. Maritain (and we may say Chesterton as well) is in fact "old hat." Undergraduates in this decade are unlikely to read either one with the fervor that moved us; professors of philosophy are not likely to give courses based upon the books of either one. For no section of church or of society does Maritain, to say nothing of the Master of Paradox, continue to embody "liberal" ideals and aspirations. And yet, and yet . . .

Is there anything in Maritain's astonishing *oeuvre*, in that regiment of books and articles and letters, to give us pause as we concede what, it seems, must be conceded, yet might justify our persistent respect, even reverence, for Jacques Maritain?

One passage has long maintained itself in my memory:

. . . the system of Einstein has replaced that of Newton, that of Copernicus had replaced that of Ptolemy.

The temptation to generalize is enormous, to think that this sort of progress extends by right to the total domain of spiritual activity...

Very frequently have we responded that this is to fall into a gross confusion: to confound the art of the philosopher with that of

the tailor or of the dressmaker. In addition, Truth does not recognize a chronological criterion.³

Words written or, at least, published in 1934, the year in which my Seton instruction began. Worse yet, it was the year in which I had graduated from high school. Would anyone today speak of the “art” of the philosopher? Who would say that “Truth” recognizes or does not recognize a criterion? Does not the reference to Einstein smack of a 1930s effort to be up-to-date, paradoxically in 1990 a confession that the author who has made it is now dated. All of this is true, but it is not the whole truth. Maritain has here put his finger on a most crucial distinction.

Some human activities, to be sure, are time-bound and it would be hard to find one more evident than is fashion in clothing. Last year’s dress or last year’s lapels are like last year’s calendar; fluctuating hemlines and whether men wear hats date old movies with precision; chain mail gave way to plate armor, the bustle has become comic, tailors on side streets advertise that they are ready to widen (or to narrow) our old ties. More fundamental human achievements follow a comparable pattern: technology presides over an evermore rapid advance by substitution.

How absurd to transfer this perception to literature—to abandon Homer because he wrote in a dialect already old in Plato’s day or to jettison Chaucer because *The New Collegiate Dictionary* does not have his terms, his spellings, his syntactical practice. Is the Parthenon out of date because it has no elevators, Notre Dame because structural steel might have allowed its towers to thrust higher?

Philosophy is like the second, not like the first. *Modus ponens* still does what *modus tollens* cannot do; “being,” already an old question in the day of Aristotle, continues to pose enigmas to phenomenologists and Thomists and Hegelians and logicians.⁴ This was the chosen field of Maritain; it was no accident that this philosopher by profession was also a voice of poetry and painting, even, to a point, of theology and mysticism and prayer. Because neither he nor any other son of Adam, no

3. “... le système d’Einstein a remplacé le système de Newton; celui de Copernic avait remplacé le système de Ptolémée . . .

“La tentation est grande de généraliser, de penser que ce genre de progrès s’étend de droit “ tout le domaine de l’activité spirituel . . .

3. Nous avons répondu bien souvent que c’est là tomber dans une confusion grossière, confondre l’art du philosophe avec celui du tailleur ou de la modiste. Et qu’au surplus la vérité ne reconnaît pas de critère chronologique,” *Sept leçons sur l’être*, in *oeuvres*, 5: 527.

4. *Metaphysics Z*, 1; 1028b 3; see also Plato *Sophist* 244A.

daughter of Eve, escapes the human condition, Maritain's philosophical insights have been expressed in language that is redolent of his long, but finite, life. To speak in his own vocabulary, that time-bound language expressed what transcends time. Maritain was a wise man and his wisdom with its beauty comes through what he wrote in French conditioned by his education, by his philosophical masters, by his reading, by the necessity of speaking to his time in the language of that time.

There is a sense in which Maritain is, in fact, "old hat," but for those of us who wish to talk sense, this does not matter. Philosophy is a love of wisdom in a human person and wisdom is immune to aging and to death. Precisely to the point that Maritain achieved something in his lifelong love of wisdom, Maritain transcends death and aging.

But, it will be objected, his vision of wisdom is a vision of another time; he was willing to be a "Thomist" and the Thomism he cultivated has had its day. Perhaps the honored burial of Brother Thomas ought to be matched with an equally honorable, but also equally definitive, burial of his doctrine, so redolent of another age.

Should this solution not be adopted then, at least, let Thomism be renovated; have we not thinkers capable of doing for Thomism what the Common Doctor did for Aristotle—help him to say more than he could have known, develop the latent truth more relevant to our world?

Something of the sort occurred when Maritain was still alive to respond or, better, to react. In the days that followed on the ending of the Second World War no philosophical stance was more modish than the "existentialist"; its *angst* and its freedom, its impatience with the static, with "nature" and with "essence" matched the allure of its positive emphasis on "existence" in all its unpredictability and contingency. More than one Thomist excitedly rejoiced in what can hardly escape a Thomist of any complexion: the Common Doctor had more than a little to say about existence too; had he not given *esse* precedence over *essentia*, made of the act of being the perfection of perfections? Was he not Sartre before Jean-Paul and, what is more, was he not Sartre without the atheism, without the ambiguity in moral perspective?

Maritain responded and his response was a reaction:

This brief treatise on existence and the existent may be described as an essay on the existentialism of St. Thomas Aquinas . . . utterly different from that of the "existentialist" philosophies propounded nowadays. If I say that it is, in my opinion, the only authentic existentialism, the reason is not that I am concerned to "rejuvenate" Thomism, so to speak, with the aid of a verbal artifice which I should be ashamed to employ, by attempting to trick out Thomas Aquinas in a costume fashionable to our day.

Not only did Maritain wish to avoid a cosmetic existentialism, neither did he wish to embrace the currently dominant Thomism:

I am not a neo-Thomist. All in all, I would rather be a paleo-Thomist than a neo-Thomist. I am, or at least I hope I am, a Thomist.

This old philosopher here too has appealed to the illustration we have heard him use:

For more than thirty years I have remarked how difficult it is to persuade our contemporaries not to confuse the philosopher's faculty of invention with the ingenuity that inspires the art of the dress designer.⁵

Maritain's voice was too personal to be submerged in any other, be that other the voice of Aquinas himself. Surely he must have been conscious of this as he wrote on current political issues, on new currents in the art of poetry and of painting. The term "invention" to characterize the activity of the philosopher was hardly accidental; he was persuaded that to be faithful to a master worth his salt was to be himself, formed by his master to be sure, but taking responsibility in a world his master could not have known.

Furthermore, there is an activity of refusal in the work of Jacques Maritain that is no less essential to him than was his affirmation of the values he felt he had found in Thomism. Here, often enough, to me at least, he seems excessive. One need not be a Cartesian to think he has been harsh on Descartes. Witty perhaps, but how unfair to write that "The shop of clear ideas is the Five-and-Ten, le *Bon Marché*, of Wisdom!"⁶ Yet more unfair his harsh description of Descartes's appearance: "A head pridefully heavy and violent, a low forehead, a prudent eye, obstinate, chimerical, a proud and earthly mouth; a strange and secret

5. "Ce court traité de l'existence et de l'existant peut être regardé comme un essai sur l'existentialisme de saint Thomas d'Aquin . . . tout différent de celui des philosophies qu'on nous propose aujourd'hui; et si je dis qu'il est à mon avis le seul existentialisme authentique, ce n'est pas que je m'applique à *rajeuner* le thomisme par un artifice verbal dont j'aurais quelque honte, et en essayant d'affubler Thomas d'Aquin d'un costume à la mode. . . . Je ne suis pas un néo-thomiste, à tout prendre j'aimerais mieux être un paléo-thomiste; je suis, j'espère être un thomiste. Et voilà plus de trente ans que je constate combien il est malaisé d'obtenir de nos contemporains qu'ils ne confondent pas les facultés d'invention des philosophes avec celles des artistes des grandes maisons de couture," *Court traité de l'existence et de l'existant* (Paris: P. Hartmann, 1947), pp. 9, 10.

6. "Le magasin des idées claires est le Bon Marché de la Sagesse," *Trois réformateurs* (Paris: Plon, 1925 [re-edition 1947]), p. 94.

life as well as one marked by ruses, but still, strong and great,"⁷ a description, no doubt, of the Frans Hals portrait of Descartes included in his *Trois reformateurs*. Luther was handled more roughly still with three dated portraits, 1520, 1526, and 1532, followed by a drawing of Luther dead. He had surrendered to the flesh, wrote Maritain, "following a progress it is permissible to note in a series of portraits, the last of which are of an astonishing bestiality."⁸ Better to have written with Chesterton:

We must be just to those huge human figures who are in fact the hinges of history . . . our own controversial conviction . . . must never mislead us into thinking that something trivial has transformed the world. So it is with that great Augustinian monk . . . whose broad and burly figure has been big enough to block out for four centuries the distant human mountain of Aquinas.⁹

In any event, Maritain saw himself as a Thomist who was not, like Brother Thomas himself, a theologian.

When the question was put to me on a stairwell in the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, I answered off the cuff that he was. For Maritain had claimed to be Thomist and Thomas was a Regent Master in the Faculty of Theology of Paris and Naples; Maritain had promoted the value of apparitions of Mary at La Salette and, it was said, had renounced the human joys of marriage for the austere joy of ascetic renunciation; he lectured and wrote on the *Summa Theologiae* with authority—I had heard him recommend that the so-called "treatise on law" in that work be extended, not by rehashing episodes and personalities, but by exercising the queenlike prerogatives of theology and enlisting the collaboration of ethnologists on how human societies in South Pacific islands interpreted "natural" inclinations. To tell the whole truth, both he and Gilson seemed to protest too much when they would almost ceremoniously defer to graduate students who were also priests on the smallest theological issue: I knew they both knew better than I what greater theological themes meant and now mean for the Church.

7. "Tête superbement lourde et violente, front bas, oeil prudent, obstiné, chimérique, bouche d'orgueil et de terre; étrange vie secrète et cauteleuse, mais tout de même forte et grande," *ibid.*, p. 76.

8. ". . . suivant une progression qu'il est loisible de constater sur la série de ses portraits, dont les derniers sont d'une bestialité surprenante," *ibid.*, p. 15; here Maritain refers his reader to a series of nine from which he had selected four in the work of Denifle-Paquier, *Oeuvres*, 4: 237; and also to H. Preuss, *Lutherbildnisse* (Leipzig, 1912).

9. *St. Thomas Aquinas: The Dumb Ox* (New York: Image Books, 1933), p. 195.

Still, Maritain's consistent claim that he was a philosopher only must be accepted. It is not possible for one of his stature to be a theologian or anything else in spite of himself. What I had taken to make him a theologian was no more than his conscious working out of philosophical wisdom in the presence of a faith so intelligent that he seemed to possess and to exercise an authentic grasp of the higher wisdom . . . seeking to understand humans in the world created by the Holy One, Maritain (and Gilson too) easily gave the impression that what they were doing was the classical theological enterprise: attempting to understand what they believed. In their own view what they were doing was "Christian philosophy," a reflective, rational examination of all that is in the presence of their biblical and ecclesial faith.

In concluding, my mind goes back to Maritain's impatience with the impatience of Descartes concerning the Greek and Roman classics. For this dinner reminds me, and there is good reason to think it has reminded our Fordham hosts, of that classical dinner, the banquet of Trimalchio.

There is a positive and a negative side to this reminiscence.

In a positive way we have been provided with a meal that transcends the human need for sustenance by making an art, if not quite a fine art, of ordering, cooking, and serving us.

That our Fordham hosts might remember Trimalchio's triumph is not without a basis in history. No one else you might have invited would be likely to know that in 1934-1935 Fordham inveighed one of Seton Hall's best classics professors, John Savage, away from us just before I should normally have taken his courses. Of course we had to hire another, and Seton Hall did well on that: She managed to attract a bright new Ph.D. from The Catholic University of America—not in a larcenous way, but for his first appointment, James O'Donnell.

With the classical tradition nurtured by the likes of Savage, there ought to be Fordham people in this room who remember that Trimalchio favored his guests with the epitaph he had chosen for himself and that in it, after some boasting of financial and political triumphs, he ended with a mention of our guild:

Pompeius Trimalchio Maecenatianus hic requiescit.
Huic seviratus absentis decretus est.
Cum posset in omnibus decuriis Romae esse, tamen noluit.
Pius, fortis, fidelis, ex parvo crevit,
sestertium reliquit trecenties,
nec unquam philosophum audivit.
Vale: et tu.¹⁰

10. Petronius arbiter, *Satyricon* 71: "Gaius Pompey Trimalchio, a freedman of Maecenas rests here. To him was decreed (even though he was not present!) status

The crucial last line, literally construed tells is that "he never listened to a philosopher"; less literally, but more accurately, it may be construed as "he never took a course from a philosopher."

Tonight, perhaps, you can make the same claim in the sense that in hearing me you have hardly heard the voice of wisdom.

But in another sense, you have. It is not possible to deal with Maritain's work, yet escape the wisdom of his voice. My last word must be one of thanks for an invitation which was not only an invitation to a splendid dinner, but also an invitation to renew acquaintance with the great man to whose work our Association is dedicated.

as a priest, a sevir, of the Emperor. Although he could have been on every council in Rome, he did not wish to. Pious, brave, faithful, he grew great from a small start; he has left 30,000,000 sesterces! He never took a course from a philosopher. Farewell; you too . . . "