

PART III
MARITAIN'S PHILOSOPHY OF BEING

DIFFICULT ACROBATICS:
“GRAVITATING HEAD FIRST TO THE MIDST OF THE STARS”

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Jacques Maritain's essay, "the Majesty and Poverty of Metaphysics," appears in book form as the opening chapter of his major opus, *The Degrees of Knowledge*. This book appeared in French in 1932, and in English, in 1935. The essay itself, however, originally appeared in 1925 as *Chroniques No. 1* in the "Le Roseau d'Or" series. The early date of this essay situates it at a special time in Maritain's life and, when we consider it within this historical context, it takes on a special meaning that transcends its publication history.

Right from the beginning of their conversion and baptism¹ in 1905-06, Jacques and his wife, Raïssa, focused on deepening and growing in their faith. From their early years forward, their days were highly structured and devoted to a balance of study and prayer.² Although Raïssa led Jacques to his salutary discovery of the wisdom of St. Thomas Aquinas in 1909, we read this earlier entry in Maritain's diary (later published as *Notebooks*) from 1908, one that contains a powerful indication of the future relation between Jacques' deep commitment to his Catholic faith and his work as a philosopher: "I resolved to abandon all 'personal inquiry' in philosophy, all desire to know *by myself*, being sure to know everything essential and everything necessary by the Word of God, and trusting for the rest on the blessed night of faith."³ Maritain's desire for spiritual growth led him to begin in 1922 the monthly meetings of the Thomist Circles. These monthly study and prayer gatherings continued at his home in Meudon for the next fifteen years. Even a cursory glance at the topics of these retreats and

¹ Jacques and Raïssa were baptized on June 11, 1906.

² Cf. Jacques Maritain, *Notebooks* (Albany, New York: Magi Books, Inc., 1984), 42-43. The book is a translation by Joseph W. Evans of Maritain's *Carnet de Notes* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1965).

³ *Ibid.*, 46 (emphasis added).

discussions⁴ reveals a life of prayer and holiness centered in Christ and His Mystical Body, the Church. Thus, when we situate the original 1925 composition date of “The Majesty and Poverty of Metaphysics” within the historical context of Maritain’s personal life, the true substance of this essay becomes more pronounced: even as Maritain pursued a life-long project of making clear what the human mind rationally *can* say of the divine, he also acknowledged at the same time that unaided human endeavors alone are never truly adequate to comprehend and articulate the ultimate transcendent mystery of God. Moreover, by this time, Maritain was also personally convinced that human intelligence...and human action...were both in need of the indispensable assistance that comes from divine grace.

On the surface, the basics of “The Majesty and Poverty of Metaphysics” are these: the majesty of metaphysics is its “human wisdom;” its poverty is that it remains, when all is said and done, an entirely human science. It does not...and cannot...name God by His own name, the name revealed to the prophets, the name possible to utter, but impossible, on account of the limits of human intelligence, to grasp. Furthermore, considering the fact that metaphysics is human wisdom, the term “wisdom” itself may be somewhat confounding, since we use this word to refer to many different kinds of wisdom: practical wisdom, theoretical or speculative wisdom, theological wisdom, and infused or mystical wisdom.

Beyond this surface reading, however, there is a still deeper richness to Maritain’s essay. Poor indeed would we be if an unaided metaphysics that is the fruit of our own intellectual labor were all that there is. At best, we might be philosophically titillated, yet the longings of our intellectual nature would remain unsatisfied. For this reason, Maritain distinguishes between a metaphysics developed by someone who lacks “a divine gift” of intuition from a metaphysics that has been developed by someone who is animated by one. The former, he says, runs the risk of falling victim to nominalism, where the term “being” becomes a mere abstraction without substantive reality.⁵ In this way, it runs the

⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, 148–74.

⁵ Jacques Maritain, “The Majesty and Poverty of Metaphysics,” *The Degrees of Knowledge* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 1.

risk of becoming the metaphysics of those for whom philosophy is little more than a “Glass Bead Game,” a reference to an invention of, and the subtitle of a book (*Magister Ludi*) by the Pulitzer-prize winning German novelist, Herman Hesse. In a metaphysics such as this, philosophers would move concepts around like chess pieces as they play an intellectual game—it is a clever and masterful form of logical gymnastics but, in the end, it has no real meaning or significance for lived-existence. Like Hesse’s protagonist, Magister Ludi, such philosophers, too, risk drowning in the icy lake-waters of actual existence because conjured or fabricated intellectual abstractions are seldom adequate for satisfying the intellect’s natural desire for understanding the truths of real life.

On the other hand, there are those who do receive the divine gift of what Maritain calls “the intuition of being.” Gifted in this way, Maritain observes that they thus are called upon to perform “difficult acrobatics”⁶—they are at once supremely blessed...and yet, even in the face of this gift, they remain burdened by the natural limitations of human intelligence. How are we to understand this gift and the metaphysical demands it creates?

In itself, and for those who have this gift, it turns out to be both a blessing *and* a curse. The blessing is the gift itself and the glimpse of the divine that this intuition reveals. By contrast, the curse consists in the inability to articulate adequately what the gift reveals or, perhaps worse, it consists in the inability to fully understand and/or appreciate the significance of this gift itself or what it reveals.

In order to help his readers to get beyond these limitations, Maritain resorts to a contrast between the natural grace bestowed upon the *true* metaphysician and that bestowed upon the *true* poet: the metaphysician and the poet complement one another, he tells us, as they alternately play “seesaw, each in turn rising up to the sky....” Their respective intuitions are like a “flash of a *spiritual light* in which a glimpse of God is revealed to” them and they both absorb “rays that come down from creative *Night*.”⁷ *Spiritual light*? This is the majesty of the gift, a glimpse of God revealed. But why, we might ask, does

⁶ Ibid., 2.

⁷ Ibid. (emphasis added).

Maritain refer to the rays of that spiritual light as coming down from creative *night*? Is it that, here again, we meet the poverty that comes from the limits of both our purely human intelligence, on the one hand, and our inability to articulate and express adequately what glimpses we do receive, on the other hand? Even though these metaphysical and poetic intuitions complement one another, from an entirely human perspective, human knowledge—even that infused with the intuition of being and the revelations of poetic intuition—is, by itself alone, still never truly sufficient or adequate to grasp and express the true majesty and ultimate incomprehensibility of the divine.

Throughout his discussion, Maritain contends that the nurture of human life in modern times has severely limited our ability to grasp these insights; indeed, “we can no longer think” in terms of the truth of being. Maritain even goes so far as to acknowledge that “true, timeless metaphysics no longer suits the modern intellect.” And yet, the timeless truths concerning the spiritual-intellectual dimension of human nature help us to understand Maritain’s mind more completely, and they provide the foundation for his reply to these objections: “the intellect has not changed its nature,” he says; rather, “it has acquired habits”...and some very bad habits at that! Fortunately, he goes on, “habits can be corrected.” And so, while the poet may be more sensitive to shifting fashions, the metaphysician must cling “desperately” to the immutable truths of reality in order to remind the age in which he or she lives of the difference between those matters that are changeable and a function of human creativity, as opposed to those things that are unchangeable because they are a part of the fixed, intelligible structure of reality. This undertaking is neither easy nor is it optional. Once bitten by the metaphysical intuition of being, and armed with the logical structures and arguments of a sound epistemology rooted in the truths of a realist ontology, we are obligated to embark upon a renewed “course of action.”⁸

And yet, for Maritain, “there is no tilling of the soil in heaven.”⁹ Metaphysics in itself is useless in the service of the needs and demands of the practical affairs of human life, where many see the advances of

⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, 2–3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

the empirical sciences as reigning supreme. These advances in the sciences, manifest in their technological applications, make our lives more comfortable, more pleasant, and more effortless. But the benefits of this progress, if considered alone, still leave the human spirit hungry and parched. What we need, Maritain reminds us, are not simply the truths of science that serve our natural desire for a comfortable life; rather, what we need is a “truth we may serve. For that truth is the food of the spirit. And, by the better part of ourselves, we are spirit.”¹⁰ Maritain makes clear that it is these so-called “useless truths” of metaphysics that give back to us our “balance and motion;” they enable us “to gravitate, head first, to the midst of the stars.” Indeed, it is metaphysics that reveals to us “authentic values and their hierarchy,” and they in turn provide us with the foundation of the ethical principles needed for the “renewed course of action.” For this reason, and echoing the famous distinction of Aristotle, metaphysics, while least necessary, is indeed most important. Without speaking the Holy Name of God revealed through the prophets, metaphysics at its summit can lead us to a “knowledge of the invisible world of divine perfections spelled out from their created reflections.” Thus, metaphysics is “the door to the leisure of that great speculative activity in which intellect alone can breathe, set, as it is, on the very peak of causes.”¹¹

With all of this having been said, the fact remains that, without divine agency and divine assistance, our natural longings and desires remain unfulfilled. Specifically, there are two desires of our spiritual human nature: the intellect longs for ultimate Truth and the fullness of Being, while our intellectual appetite, the will, longs for Goodness Itself, a longing that culminates in the joy or *gaudium* that comes from the possession of the One who is Truth and Goodness Itself. In this regard, Maritain’s ideas are in perfect accord with Aquinas’ answer to the question whether, in this life, it is better to know God or to love Him. Ultimately and in itself it is better to know God, Aquinas says, since it is this fullness of knowledge that our human intellectual nature naturally desires, to see God face to face in the Beatific Vision; however, in this life, where our knowledge is limited, incomplete, and in danger

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 4–5.

of error, Aquinas cautions that it is better to love God than to know Him.

Maritain echoes this point when he says that, in and of itself, the life of the intellect "is not enough for us. It needs a complement,"¹² especially since the intellectual union given through the intentionality of knowledge (i.e., the union between the knower and the known) is so imperfect. For Maritain, this complement comes about through a union of a different sort, namely, the union between the lover and the beloved. At its highest natural level, the union that results from the human love for God accomplishes, on this very earth, what the intellect in this life cannot: "Love thus arising, impels the soul to a union in the real order, a union which intellect, left all to itself, cannot achieve...."¹³

But there is more. There is the good news that comes from that very Wisdom that transcends metaphysics and indeed surpasses all understanding, and that good news is this: we are able to love God because He has first loved us. This fact itself surpasses not only all human understanding, but all human effort as well; it is God's love for us that is precisely the primary and transforming gift of grace. Maritain famously refers to this unique form of love as "mad love" (*amour fou*): "the *mad love* that Wisdom Itself [God] has for each and all of us...."¹⁴ It is a transforming love that unites us, in the imperfection of this life, with the very source of Love Itself: "love unites us in our heart to [the triune God] who is hidden...."¹⁵ Under the loving care, protection, and guidance of the Holy Spirit, we are able to experience "the Divine things imbedded in us by charity, [and] God becomes ours by charity.... This secret wisdom which secretly purifies the soul attains God as a hidden God, a saving God, one who is the more a savior the more hidden He is."¹⁶

This form of wisdom is a divine grace, a supernatural gift that manifests itself in many ways and in varying degrees, depending on the

¹² *Ibid.*, 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

unique personality of the person who receives it and in whom it resides. The distinguishing mark of this gift of divine grace in which the saints (ordinary and heroic) participate and with which they cooperate, is that they “do not contemplate [in order] to know, but to love. They do not love for the sake of loving but for the love of [God] whom they love. It is for the love of their first beloved, God, that they aspire to that very union with God that love demands.... [I]t is by forgetting all else so that they do not live, but the Beloved lives in them.”¹⁷

Maritain admonishes philosophers who too readily forget the part that love plays in human life: how could we neglect love, he asks, since “it is the very thing that does accomplish everything.”¹⁸ And yet, in another of those seemingly limitless theological paradoxes, divine love accomplishes all that it does through us only to the measure that we open ourselves up to it and allow it to work through us. Only sin is truly our own; it is the “nothing” which, without Christ, we are able to do on our own and without Him. Maritain’s friend, Thomas Merton, ratifies, reaffirms, and reiterates this paradox when he writes: “...we cannot find [God] unless He has first found us. We cannot begin to seek Him without a special gift of His grace, yet if we wait for grace to move us, before beginning to seek Him, we will probably never begin.”¹⁹

And so, in order to read Maritain’s essay, “The Majesty and Poverty of Metaphysics,” correctly and completely, we will do well to keep in mind the following three points: 1) after their conversion, the Maritains’ primary devotion was and remained an abiding commitment to grow in the depths of their faith and spiritual lives; 2) Jacques’ early 1908 insight about the role that God’s grace plays in human life and thought sustained him throughout his personal life as a man of faith and his professional life as a Catholic philosopher; and 3) as a Catholic philosopher, the ideas Jacques expressed in his 1925 essay reflect his unwavering commitment to making clear the philosophical underpinnings of the truths of the Catholic faith.

¹⁷ Ibid., 10–11.

¹⁸ Ibid., 11.

¹⁹ Thomas Merton, *No Man Is An Island* (Garden City, New York: Image Books, A Division of Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1967), 13.

Admittedly, being receptive to divine grace is not an easy thing to do. Maritain knew that, and he warned us of this essential risk: whether for the poet or the metaphysician, the answer to the call offered through those poetic and metaphysical gifts of intuition requires the consent of the recipient that involves some very difficult acrobatics indeed. The majesty of metaphysics is that it takes us "to the door," as Maritain writes; it cannot go through it. The poverty of metaphysics is that, in the end, it is still nothing more than a human approach to the divine; it is not the revelation to us of the divine itself. For, as sublime as a natural knowledge of God is, it is still only as great as our human limitations allow. It is not, however, as great *as is possible for God*. Fortunately for us, and aided by the wisdom and prayers of the saintly Jacques and Raïssa, the love and grace of God make the impossible possible, even in this life, since they enable us "to gravitate, head first, to the midst of the stars...."²⁰

²⁰ Jacques Maritain, "The Majesty and Poverty of Metaphysics," in *The Degrees of Knowledge* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 4.