

## HOW MARITAIN MAY HAVE BRIDGED THE GAP BETWEEN METAPHYSICS AND ACTIVISM<sup>1</sup>

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In this essay, I explore the possibility that the intuition of being provided the intellectual continuity for Maritain's lifelong dedication to both philosophical contemplation and activism. In Part I, I formulate the problem of Maritain's affinities for metaphysics and activism; in Part II, I enumerate examples of his activism,<sup>2</sup> which turn out to make for a very impressive list; in Part III, I set forth the evolution of Maritain's conception of being and show how the parallel growth in importance that the intuition of being assumes in his writings offers a plausible bridge between his metaphysics and his philosophical activism.

### I. AN IMPROBABLE ALLIANCE

Since my earliest years as a student of Maritain, I have remained fascinated with a short passage in Raïssa Maritain's memoirs. There she writes that during their student years at the Sorbonne, Jacques sought to resolve his frustrations at finding truth by an unseemly coupling of the works of Spinoza and Nietzsche.<sup>3</sup>

Not surprisingly, he eventually tired of that cobble. For one thing, the respective philosophical contents are mutually incompatible and, for another, neither is anything like the Thomism that would finally capture Maritain's mind and heart. Yet there are features of this

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<sup>1</sup> A somewhat shorter version of this was published in *Notes et Documents*, 20 (May-August, 2011): 69-78.

<sup>2</sup> This enumeration first appeared in my *homage* to Maritain on the occasion of his death in "A Tribute to Jacques Maritain: Philosophical Activist," *Social Justice Review* June (1973): 77-78.

<sup>3</sup> Raïssa Maritain, *We Have Been Friends Together and Adventures in Grace. The Memoirs of Raïssa Maritain*, trans. Julie Kernan (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1961), 63.

curious alliance between Spinoza's rigorous metaphysical essentialist monism and Nietzsche's existential integrity that remained constant throughout Maritain's life; each enshrines a commitment to which Maritain was drawn since his youth: the search for absolute truth and a public witness to those truths in the face of injustice.

With regard to the latter, consider that, when only sixteen, Maritain would come home from his philosophy course at the Lycée Henri IV and, in despair of finding answers to his philosophical questions, throw himself on the rug.<sup>4</sup> And Spinoza's solitary life dedicated to study and the pursuit of truth does not differ much from Maritain's own inclination. According to those who knew him well, Maritain always preferred a life of solitude and study.<sup>5</sup> Not only did he regard himself first and foremost as a metaphysician,<sup>6</sup> he also valued contemplation as the highest of all activities<sup>7</sup> and had, in fact, pursued a life of religious contemplation so far as circumstances permitted.<sup>8</sup> In 1961, he entered the Little Brothers of Jesus, a religious order in Toulouse, for a life of study and contemplation:

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 353; Helen Iswolsky, *Light Before Dusk* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1942), 184.

<sup>6</sup> This preference comes through powerfully in the following of Maritain's works: *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), 1-7; *Existence and the Existent*, trans. Lewis Galantieri and Gerald B. Phelan (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1959), 31; *The Person and the Common Good*, trans. John J. Fitzgerald (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 14.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Scholasticism and Politics*, trans. and ed. Mortimer J. Adler (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1960), ch. VII, esp. 173.

<sup>8</sup> For evidence of Maritain's early attraction to religious contemplation, see Raïssa Maritain, *We Have Been Friends Together* and *Adventures in Grace*, 171-72 and 179-80. His own writings on the subject reveal a love and insight into the topic that could only come from one who practiced contemplation. See, e.g., *Degrees*, chs. VI to IX, *Prayer and Intelligence* (in collaboration with Raïssa Maritain), trans. Algar Thorold (London: Sheed and Ward, 1928), and *Liturgy and Contemplation* (in collaboration with Raïssa Maritain), trans. Joseph W. Evans (New York: P. J. Kennedy and Sons, 1960).

He has long loved the Little Brothers, who pursue an essentially contemplative life in the very midst of the world, and 'at the core of the masses'; he attended their Mass of foundation in the Basilica of Sacré-Coeur in 1933, and from the beginning he has had a great influence on their intellectual and spiritual formation. In October of 1970 Maritain himself became a Little Brother.<sup>9</sup>

In regard to any affinity Maritain may have had for Nietzsche's existential integrity, consider two early examples of his activism. The first is Raïssa Maritain's account of how she and Jacques first met at the Sorbonne:

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.... And he asked me to join this committee. Such was my first meeting with Jacques Maritain.<sup>10</sup>

The second example is more dramatic. Having abandoned his commitment to the philosophies of Spinoza and Nietzsche and despairing of ever finding truth, Jacques and Raïssa entered into a suicide pact: if they could not find truth in the world within one year, they would kill themselves.<sup>11</sup> Fortunately for them and for us, they discovered the lectures of Henri Bergson before the year ended.<sup>12</sup>

On the face of things, it admittedly seems implausible that Maritain could have been drawn to both philosophers in the belief that he saw

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<sup>9</sup> Joseph W. Evans, "Jacques Maritain," *The New Scholasticism* XLVI (1972): 5.

<sup>10</sup> Raïssa Maritain, *We Have Been Friends Together and Adventures in Grace*, 41.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-68.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 72, 80; Jacques Maritain, *Bergsonian Philosophy and Thomism*, trans. Mabelle L. and J. Gordon Andison (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955), 286-87, 304.

some doctrinal unity between their philosophies. What is plausible is that each one spoke to him about things that were important to the already disheartened student: transcendental truth and the call of the concrete, here and now, world. I will go even further and suggest ("argue" seems a bit too strong here) that the young Maritain's passion for each *plausibly* generated a logic that unified them, each to the other: one without the other is impossible; therefore, somehow the transcendent realm of unchanging universal truth and the worldly realm of concrete, changing, particular things are kindred. By this kind of unity I do not mean the obvious ontological relation between universals and particulars exemplified in the syllogism, "Every deliberate killing of an innocent human being is immoral; Socrates is an innocent human being; therefore, the deliberate killing of Socrates is immoral" or as exemplified in moderate realism's account of the same essence existing in things as concrete and particular and in the intellect as abstract and universal. If not these, one might ask, "What's left but Maritain's satisfaction with the two philosophical theories as the most defensible ones he knew at that early stage of his career?" But that would mean that the glue joining the philosophies of Spinoza and Nietzsche was merely a psychological unification of the two. The trouble with this is that it would substitute a merely subjective sense of unity for an objective unification that leads to a philosophical account that integrates one's metaphysics and behavior in the concrete situation. Instead, what I have in mind is the possibility that all along Maritain experienced intuitive moments of the continuity of the transcendent and the concrete. But how?

I do not think that what may seem to be the answer to that question, to wit, Maritain's theory of connatural knowledge, is the correct answer. Though his descriptions of this way of knowing do have their mystique:

In this knowledge through union or inclination, connaturality or congeniality, the intellect is at play not alone, but together with affective inclinations and the dispositions of the will, and is guided and directed by them. It is not rational knowledge, knowledge through the conceptual, logical and discursive exercise of reason. But it is really and genuinely knowledge,

though obscure and perhaps incapable of giving account of itself, or of being translated into words.<sup>13</sup>

This knowledge derives its name, “connatural,” insofar as it is *co-natured* with the individual human being’s actions, manifesting itself in primal human strivings, such as the urge to preserve one’s life, to know the truth, to live with one’s fellow human beings in society. Although connatural knowledge expresses itself in mystical experience and poetic knowledge,<sup>14</sup> Maritain looks to moral experience for “the most widespread instance of knowledge through connaturality.”<sup>15</sup> To be specific, “...it is in experiential—not philosophical—knowledge of moral virtues that Thomas Aquinas saw the first and main example of knowledge through inclination or through connaturality.”<sup>16</sup> Whereas one can boast a masterful knowledge of moral science, possessing a conceptual and rational grasp of the virtues, and still lead an immoral life, another can lack a conceptual and rational knowledge of the moral virtues, but act in accordance with them, because one possesses them in one’s own powers of will and desire.<sup>17</sup> Connaturality, Maritain insists, is foundational to Natural Law: “...the judgments in which Natural Law is made manifest to practical Reason do not proceed from any conceptual, discursive, rational exercise of reason; they proceed from that *connaturality* or congeniality through which what is consonant with the essential inclinations of human nature is grasped by the intellect as good; what is dissonant, as bad.”<sup>18</sup>

All of which makes clear that connaturality for Maritain is an operation of practical intellect, knowledge for the sake of acting. That is why he excludes knowledge through connaturality as a consideration of metaphysics.<sup>19</sup> But, in this essay, I wish to explore the possibility of

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<sup>13</sup> Jacques Maritain, “On Knowledge Through Connaturality,” in *The Range of Reason* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953), 23.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-25.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

explaining his dual affinity for metaphysics and activism as an operation of speculative intuition, knowledge for the sake of knowing, that directly unveils the connection between transcendental being and concrete, particular being.

Strange as it may seem, Spinoza's doctrine of intuition may have been the voice, albeit muted, that bespoke its coherence with Nietzsche's philosophy. Consider Harald Hoffding's representation of Spinoza's view of intuition:

The highest form of knowledge according to Spinoza, is the intuitive, in which the particular phenomenon is immediately perceived to be, as it were, interpenetrated by the general order of things, as e.g. I immediately perceive that the two lines are parallel to one another if they each run parallel to one and the same third line; or, as I, in the knowledge which I have of a subject, at the same time immediately perceive what it is to know a subject. *The difference between the universal and the individual has here entirely disappeared; the unity of the two is perceived at a single glance.* It is Spinoza's highest aim to understand as much as possible in this immediate and intuitive manner. In the last book of his *Ethica* he seeks to understand individual minds in their inner unity with the eternal essence: *an intuition which forms the consummation of his theoretical and practical endeavours.*<sup>20</sup>

Of course, even if Spinoza's doctrine of intuition exerted an influence on Maritain's early thinking, specifically by awakening his intuitive sensibilities and thereby enabling an objective unification of "his theoretical and practical endeavours," that intuition had to be profoundly different from the intuition of being about which Maritain would write years later as a Thomistic philosopher. For one thing, and most importantly, the intuitions of Spinoza were of logical entities, effects *implied* by the formal causality of infinite substance, whereas Maritain's intuited entities were unique and dynamic effects of the First Efficient Cause, *entia ut exertia* (see Section III, below).

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<sup>20</sup> Harald Hoffding, *A History of Modern Philosophy*, trans. B. E. Meyer (London: Dover Publications, Inc., 1955), vol. I, 306 (italics added).

## II. ACTIVISM, THICK AND THIN

"...[A]mong those of my contemporaries still living as I write these lines, I see in the Western World no more than three revolutionaries worthy of the name—Eduardo Frei in Chile, Saul Alinski in America...and myself in France, who am not worth beans, since my call as a philosopher has obliterated my possibilities as an agitator..."<sup>21</sup> Maritain may have had "tongue in cheek"<sup>22</sup> when he wrote these lines about himself as revolutionary and agitator, but there can be no doubt about his approval of the vocation of public agitator, as is clear from his correspondence with Saul Alinski.<sup>23</sup>

At the same time, there can be no doubt that Maritain took his "call as a philosopher" seriously. As noted above, he gave pride of place to metaphysical study and contemplation. Maritain insists that the search for truth and goodness in themselves transcends utility and, in so doing, reminds society of the supreme importance of what are not means to ends but ends in themselves, things worth aspiring to just for themselves<sup>24</sup>: "What we need is not truths that serve us but a truth that we may serve."<sup>25</sup> We must live our lives by values and realities that transcend time, things that are worth knowing simply for themselves; for that is the knowledge that leads us to understand that means that serve us are, in the end, empty without the knowledge of our "very reasons for living and suffering and hoping."<sup>26</sup> By his witnessing in society to the "supreme dignity of thought," the philosopher calls attention to "what is eternal in man," thereby creating in us a thirst for knowledge that is pure and disinterested (knowledge for the sake of knowing). This is a knowledge of the nature of things, of mind, human

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<sup>21</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), 23.

<sup>22</sup> Bernard Doering, *The Philosopher and the Provocateur: The Correspondence of Jacques Maritain and Saul Alinski*, ed. Bernard Doering (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), xiii.

<sup>23</sup> See the work just cited in #21.

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Maritain, *On the Use of Philosophy* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), 6-7.

<sup>25</sup> Maritain, *Degrees*, 4.

<sup>26</sup> Maritain, *On the Use of Philosophy*, 7.

nature, and God. Such knowledge is superior to anything we can produce, for the simple reason that thought precedes action and nothing can place boundaries on thought. All of which tells us that our practical decisions “depend on the ultimate questions that human thought is able to ask.” Here Maritain cannot resist pointing to the irony of the philosopher’s calling: The impact that philosophy has on human history results from the fact that philosophy addresses questions that have no practical use.<sup>27</sup>

Even so, Maritain is just as insistent that the call to eternal verities must not blind the philosopher to the reality that he is a member of society with duties to the latter that his calling imposes on him:

...[T]he philosopher cannot—especially in our time—shut himself up in an ivory tower; he cannot help being concerned about human affairs, in the name of philosophy itself and by reason of the very values which philosophy has to defend and maintain. He has to *bear witness* to these values every time they are attacked, as in the time of Hitler when insane racist theories worked to provoke the mass murder of Jews, or as today before the threat of enslavement by communist despotism. The philosopher must bear witness by expressing his thoughts and telling the truth as he sees it. This may have repercussions in the domain of politics; it is not in itself, a political action—it is simply applied philosophy.<sup>28</sup>

Besides the moral injunction to give public witness, Maritain also recognizes what might be called organic integrity: “...Thought and action are inseparable; and the action of a philosopher, which is to say, the judgment that he makes about events, is only the concrete realization of his thought, and a way to give witness to truth.”<sup>29</sup> These

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 14-15.

<sup>29</sup> My translation from the French: “...la pensée et l’action ne sont pas séparables; et l’action d’un philosophe, c’est-à-dire le jugement qu’il porte sur les événements, n’est que l’aboutissement concret de sa pensée, et une manière pour lui de rendre témoignage à la vérité” (Jacques Maritain, *Lettre Sur l’Indépendance* [Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1936], 7-8).



words are emblematic of his lifetime view of the relation between philosophy and activism.

But what kind of behavior by a philosopher counts as philosophical activism? The agitator is by definition an activist, but the activist is not necessarily an agitator. Yet both share a passion for the world of real people and events. Does writing articles and books that address moral and socio-political problems in a strictly conceptual way, such as the idea of slavery or the idea of just and unjust homicide, count as activism? These would be contributions on the level of practical philosophy, and, as such, are applications of speculative philosophy to human affairs. Unlike the dichotomy that separates the two levels in Kantian philosophy, Thomism acknowledges a continuity between them, since they belong to that category of practical philosophy that Maritain calls "speculatively practical science."<sup>30</sup> As important as such writings are, it is hard to see how they could count as examples of activism. Philosophical activism implies the philosopher's confrontation with a contemporary, moral or socio-political evil in the world, against which he publicly identifies himself as an agent of specific action, such as initiating or at least signing a petition of complaint against a person, institution, or practice. Because a speculatively practical science, like ethics, operates, in contrast, entirely on the conceptual level, it requires no immediate actual evil to confront.

What about speculatively practical examples that, while not directly addressing existing injustices, do nevertheless pertain to them and move readers to act for their abolition? Perhaps writings and lectures in this second category can qualify as examples of philosophical activism and their authors' as philosophical activists. If so, we might characterize them as examples of activism in the *thin* sense and say that Maritain compiled an impressive record as a philosophical activist in that sense. For despite his preference for the solitary life of study and contemplation, Maritain had, over the years, consistently attempted to relate his philosophy to the problems of human affairs. Few have written more searchingly and persistently on the relation of

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<sup>30</sup> Maritain, *Degrees*, 346.

the person to political society,<sup>31</sup> the basis of human rights,<sup>32</sup> capitalism and communism,<sup>33</sup> the nature and goals of democratic society,<sup>34</sup> pluralism and freedom of conscience,<sup>35</sup> Church and State,<sup>36</sup> and the role of the Christian in modern society.<sup>37</sup>

These writings have had enormous influence in Europe and in North and South America.<sup>38</sup> Not only have they provided ideological sustenance for social action and workers' groups,<sup>39</sup> they have also inspired the formation of at least one major political party, Eduardo Frei's "democracy of the left" party, and contributed to far-reaching social and economic changes, such as the land and industrial reforms initiated by Frei while President of Chile<sup>40</sup> and by Rafael Caldera during his presidency of Venezuela.<sup>41</sup> Maritain's emphasis on the need for a free society to be progressive, i.e. to make its social, economic, and political institutions increasingly democratic and open to participation by all its members, has had some success in persuading conservative

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<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good* and *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956).

<sup>32</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Rights of Man and Natural Law*, trans. Doris C. Anson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943).

<sup>33</sup> Jacques Maritain, *True Humanism*, trans. Margot Adamson (London: G. Bles, The Centenary press, 1938), 37-42, 107-09.

<sup>34</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Christianity and Democracy*, trans. Doris C. Anson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944).

<sup>35</sup> See, e.g., Maritain, *On the Uses of Philosophy*.

<sup>36</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Things That Are Not Caesar's*, trans. J. F. Scanlon (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931).

<sup>37</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Scholasticism and Politics*, ch. VIII.

<sup>38</sup> James D. Collins, "Maritain's Impact on Thomism in America," in *Jacques Maritain: The Man and His Achievement*, ed. Joseph W. Evans (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 25-45.

<sup>39</sup> Iswolsky, *Light Before Dusk*, 104-17.

<sup>40</sup> Leonard Gross, *The Last and Best Hope: Eduardo Frei and Chilean Democracy* (New York: Random House, 1967), 89, 92, 231.

<sup>41</sup> Rafael Caldera, "Personal Testimony" and Alceuj Amorosa, "The Influence of Maritain in Latin America," *The New Scholasticism* XLVI (1972): 81.

Catholics, both in Europe and Latin America, that Christianity has no special connections with nationalism or with “order for the sake of order.”<sup>42</sup> In contrast, he chose as the motto for his first book in political philosophy, “There is order even among the demons.”<sup>43</sup> At a time when the privileged classes and many of the clergy in these countries were leaning increasingly toward fascism in their fear of socialism and communism, Maritain’s “democracy of the person”<sup>44</sup> provided them with a viable alternative. Viable because it seeks to protect traditional rights and initiatives in the individual,<sup>45</sup> while calling for the elimination of socio-economic inequities through social reconstruction.<sup>46</sup>

But when practical philosophy delves more deeply into the realm of applied philosophy, it enters the category of “practically practical science.”<sup>47</sup> And it is here that one can appreciate the young Maritain’s affinity for Nietzsche’s existential integrity—living according to one’s principles—and where we see him as a philosophical activist. Nietzsche wrote, “The only critique of a philosophy is this, whether one can live according to it.”<sup>48</sup> Taken by itself, this statement is broad, for it can just as easily refer to one who simply lives his daily life according to his principles. But it would be a clarion call for one with Maritain’s passion for justice. His impressive record of speaking out against specific instances of what he regarded as injustice and error in the world

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<sup>42</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Pour La Justice* (New York: Editions de la Maison Française, 1943), 64-65; Alfredo Mendizábal, “Catholicism and Politics,” in *European Ideologies* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948), 492; see also 5-6, 12-13, n.1, 28-31, 47.

<sup>43</sup> The motto appears on the frontispiece of some editions of *La Primauté du Spirituel* (Paris: Plon, 1927).

<sup>44</sup> E.g., Maritain, *Scholasticism and Politics*, 85.

<sup>45</sup> E.g., Maritain, *Man and the State*, 103-07.

<sup>46</sup> E.g., Jacques Maritain, *Freedom in the Modern World*, trans. Richard O’ Sullivan (London: Sheed and Ward, 1935), 139-51.

<sup>47</sup> Maritain, *Degrees*, 346.

<sup>48</sup> My translation: “Die einzige Kritik einer Philosophie is die, ob man nach ihr leben könne.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nietzsche Brevier*, ed. Wolfgang Kraus, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Wien und Stuttgart: Georg Prachner Verlag, 1954), 19.

introduces us to Maritain as philosophical activist in the *thick* sense of the term. Not that he involved himself in partisan politics. On the contrary, he stated more than once that in order to preserve his intellectual independence, the philosopher must stay clear of such involvement and offer no philosophical support for any political party. The philosopher *as philosopher* has, in Maritain's judgment, no special commitment to the left or the right. But to the extent that these parties adopt platforms that imply judgments on such things as freedom, rights, justice, and the nature and destiny of man, they are fair game for the philosopher's critique, regardless of their political stripe.<sup>49</sup>

For example: During the Spanish Civil War, Maritain refused to take sides. Instead, he worked with groups whose aim was to provide relief to Spanish political refugees.<sup>50</sup> He also wrote a criticism of both the Loyalists and the Communists for their excesses and challenged Franco's claim that he was waging a "holy war" against the Communists. In the same essay, he laid much of the blame for the war itself on the materialism and greed of the Spanish privileged classes and on the traditional identification of the hierarchy of the Spanish clergy with the aristocracy, rather than with the poor.<sup>51</sup> Maritain, along with others, also signed a manifesto condemning the destruction of Guernica by German bomber planes. His position on the war resulted in misunderstandings and hard feelings, as in the cooling between himself and Paul Claudel,<sup>52</sup> and also subjected him to criticism by the Rightist press and by those whom Maritain referred to as the *bien pensants*, i.e., well-meaning but misguided people.<sup>53</sup> But at the same time, it earned him lifelong friends among Spanish political refugees.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Maritain, *On the Use of Philosophy*, 14-15; *Lettre sur L'Independence*, 8-9.

<sup>50</sup> Yves R. Simon, "Jacques Maritain: The Growth of a Christian Philosopher," in *Jacques Maritain: The Man and His Achievement*, ed. Joseph W. Evans (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 18.

<sup>51</sup> Maritain's criticism appeared in his introduction to Alfredo Mendizabal's *The Martyrdom of Spain*, trans. Charles Hope Lumley (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938).

<sup>52</sup> Iswolsky, *Light Before Dusk*, 195.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

When anti-Semitism began to spread throughout Europe in the wake of Hitler's propaganda, Maritain did not remain silent. In 1938, he gave a public lecture in Paris in which he vigorously denounced the persecution of the Jews in Germany and exposed the falsifications in the defamatory stereotype of the Jew.<sup>55</sup> Once again, his activism earned him the criticism from the rightist press and the *bien pensants*, many of whom regarded Hitler as their savior against Communism.<sup>56</sup>

Nor did Maritain hesitate to speak out against Marshall Pétain and the Vichy regime for its anti-Semitism, its betrayal of the French people, and for its slavish obedience to the Nazis.<sup>57</sup> When the outbreak of World War II made it impossible for him and Raïssa to return to France from his lecture tour in Canada and the United States, he continued to support his countrymen by working with the Free French in New York City; through radio addresses and publications, he called the attention of the Americans to the condition of his people and appealed for food and money for French relief.<sup>58</sup> Throughout the war, he also worked with the New School in New York City, producing works of a more philosophical and scholarly nature on subjects such as democracy, totalitarianism, and human rights.<sup>59</sup> Miniature editions of one of these works, *Christianisme et Démocratie*,<sup>60</sup> were dropped by British Royal Air Force planes over France in 1944.<sup>61</sup>

In 1947, Maritain, then French Ambassador to the Vatican, served as a member of the UNESCO symposium on human rights. The aim of the symposium was to investigate the theoretical problems generated by a universal declaration of human rights, such as the Human Rights

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Jacques Maritain, *France, My Country, Through the Disaster* (New York: Longman's Green and Co., 1941), 109.

<sup>58</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Messages (1941-1944)* (New York: Éditions de la Maison Française, Inc., 1945).

<sup>59</sup> E.g., Maritain, *The Rights of Man and Natural Law*.

<sup>60</sup> Maritain, *Christianisme et Démocratie* (New York: Éditions de la Française, Inc., 1943).

<sup>61</sup> Alfredo Mendizábal, "Catholicism and Politics," 492.

Commission of the United Nations was undertaking at the time. Other members of the symposium were Aldous Huxley, who was its chairman, E. H. Carr, Richard McKeon, Harold Laski, Benedetto Croce, and P. Teilhard de Chardin.<sup>62</sup> Maritain wrote the introduction to the book, *Human Rights*,<sup>63</sup> which contains the positions of the members.

To the charge of multiplying examples, I plead guilty. In my defense, I can only say that I thought it necessary to do so for the sake of showing how much a part of Maritain's life activism was and why, therefore, it deserves scrutiny in the light of his commitment to contemplation and speculative philosophy. Thus, back to the question that I raised at the outset of this essay. Is there by any chance a continuity between Maritain's metaphysics and his philosophical activism? Experience offers an abundance of intellectuals and scholars who are vigorous social activists, but their activism doesn't necessarily flow from an articulated intellectual justification. Instead, it's just temperament. They're simply confrontational: "you push me, I push you back." Other cases of activism by intellectuals indicate a continuity between the conclusions of speculative intellect and the justification for the activism. But here is where the difficulties begin. Applying an ethical or political theory to a concrete situation is, as noted earlier, to enter a realm of increasing variables and opaqueness. But the question asked of Maritain is different, as different as the relation between a rule of behavior, such as "Do not steal," and taking the property of a given person is from the relation between Maritain's metaphysics and signing a letter against Franco. The question is: can some continuity exist between the latter two terms? This returns me to the question I raised above: What kind of unity joins Maritain's speculative philosophy with his activism? Objective? Pragmatic? Or merely subjective?

### III. CLOSING THE GAP BETWEEN METAPHYSICS AND ACTIVISM

As noted, what saved Jacques and Raïssa from executing the terms of their suicide pact was their introduction to Henri Bergson's philosophy at the Collège de France.<sup>64</sup> Bergson showed them that it was

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<sup>62</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, 76-80.

<sup>63</sup> Jacques Maritain et al., *Human Rights* (London: Allan Wingate, 1949).

<sup>64</sup> Raïssa Maritain, *We Have Been Friends Together and Adventures in Grace*, ch. 4, esp. 69-84.

possible for the human mind to transcend matter not only in knowledge but also in freedom. Eventually, Jacques' Bergsonian discipleship failed to hold his allegiance, as he went from the status of Bergson's prize pupil to stern critic. What was at stake was the status of the concept. For Bergson, concepts distorted reality by reducing what was always in flux to a series of frozen depictions as in the frames of a motion picture.<sup>65</sup> A true-to-life knowledge of reality was achieved not by the analytic procedure of conceptual thinking but by intuition, which Bergson construed as a supra-rational faculty whereby the will turns in on itself to create a "sympathy" that opens oneself to a knowledge of the real.<sup>66</sup>

Maritain's discovery of Thomas Aquinas' writings introduced him to a construal of the concept that protected the intelligibility of our knowledge of the real from distortions caused by representations, not knowledge, of extramental things. The concept was not what the mind knows, but rather *that by which it knows*.<sup>67</sup> As Maritain's career as a Thomistic philosopher unfolded, his writings revealed a growing emphasis on being as diverse and multiple. This represents a significant change from his *Bergsonian Philosophy and Thomism*, where the emphasis was on being as "the most common and most abstract concept" and an important departure from his friend and teacher, Garrigou-Lagrange, who very clearly conceived of being as a general concept, in effect an essence:

This first knowledge is truly an apprehension, a mental perception, an imperfect intuition, associated with abstraction. The intellect considers, in sensible things, intelligible being and its most general aspects, without actually considering the sensible qualities...<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: The Modern Library, 1944), 331-34.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-35, 8-9, 172.

<sup>67</sup> Maritain, *Degrees*, 127-28.

<sup>68</sup> Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *God: His Existence and His Nature*, 2 vols. (Saint Louis and London: Herder, 1949), vol. I, 113-14; Sister M. Elizabeth, I. H. M., "Two Contemporary Philosophers and the Concept of Being," *The Modern Schoolmen* 25 (1948): 224-37.

Maritain uses the term, “trans-objective being” to refer, in the case of being, to both a unity and a multiplicity; i.e., although the concept of being contains what is common to all beings, viz., that they exist, it nevertheless also refers to being, not as known, not as an object of thought, but as existing in diversity and multiplicity outside the mind.<sup>69</sup> In other words, our knowledge of a thing’s being never exhausts its being.

Another important aspect of this new emphasis is that it brings Maritain closer to Bergson than when he wrote *Bergsonian Philosophy and Thomism*. Not only is there an emphasis placed on multiplicity and diversity, but also on the energy and dynamism, of being:

Observe that being presents two aspects. One of these is its aspect of *essence* which corresponds particularly to the first operation of the mind [simple apprehension]. For we form concepts primarily in order to apprehend, though in many cases blindly, essences—which are positive capacities of existence. The other is the aspect of *existence*, the *esse* in the strict sense, which is the end in which things attain their achievement, their act, their “energy” *par excellence*, the supreme actuality of whatever is.... It is the second operation of the mind, in the judgment, by composition and division, that the speculative intellect grasps being, not only from the standpoint of essence but from that of existence itself, actual or possible. Existence is here apprehended *ut exercita*, that is, as actualized by a subject; not merely presented to the mind, as in the case with the simple concept of existence, but as possessed potentially or actually.<sup>70</sup>

Being is not, as Maritain presented it in *Bergsonian Philosophy and Thomism*, a concept, but it is now an act exercised by a subject. And as the emphasis on the act of existence grows in Maritain’s thought, so does the emphasis on the role of intuition grow. For even though existence is grasped *ut exercita* through the conceptual functions of judgment, it remains that the concept—insofar as it grasps the essence of things—cannot grasp being as multiple, diverse, and dynamic.

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<sup>69</sup> Maritain, *Degrees*, 93-94.

<sup>70</sup> Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, 28.



Is it plausible that within Maritain's Thomism one can look for an understanding of the intuition of being that could serve as an integrating principle in the sense of deepening the philosopher's understanding of his or her obligation to give public witness? Consider the following from his writings:

A philosopher is not a philosopher if he is not a metaphysician. And it is the intuition of being... that makes the metaphysician.<sup>71</sup>

It is not enough to teach philosophy, even Thomist philosophy, in order to possess this intuition. Let us call it a matter of luck, a boon, perhaps a kind of docility to the light. Without it man will always have an opining, precarious and sterile knowledge, however freighted with erudition it may be; a *knowledge about*. He will go round and round the flame without ever going through it. With it, even though he stray from the path, he will have the added privilege of solitude and melancholy. If the poet can be called a seer, the philosopher is no less entitled to this name, though in his own way. He may at times be the victim of some bewilderment; but at other times he will know the joy of discovery; and for all of the knowledge he will have got out of books, for all of his knowledge of life, he will owe both bewilderment and joy to the fact that he remains enraptured with being.<sup>72</sup>

Going "...round and round the flame without ever going through it." This line is reminiscent of Bergson's criticism of what he viewed as the rationalist model of knowledge that dominated modern European thought and immured the human mind with concepts. Truly, the investigation of being could not stand as a science (*scientia*) if it were not the investigation of being *as being*. But without the intuition of being, that investigation would, insofar as it studies only the concept of being, restrict the study to *possible* being. That is, of course, inevitable because what stamps being as real is being as *to be*, being as it actually exists; but, as Gilson writes, "in a certain sense, it must be said that *being* is always *conceived* by us apart from existence, for the very simple

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 21-22.

reason that existence itself cannot possibly be *conceived*.”<sup>73</sup> Without the intuition of being, the study of being *insofar as it is being* reduces being to a mere concept, thereby leading the student into rationalism and pedantry. That is why Maritain insists that one cannot be a philosopher without being a metaphysician and that one cannot be a metaphysician without having the intuition of being.

There is an incalculable difference between an existent being and a merely conceptual being, but the liability of the pedant is the tendency to lose sight of real things in favor of a fascination with the neat and tidy world of concepts and abstractions. There is the *idea* of oppressed human beings and the *reality* of oppressed human beings. Is it possible that for the pedant, the one whose conception of the world is derived from books alone, the difference between *the thing* and the *idea of the thing* gradually fades? Maritain's temperament seems to have protected him from pedantic liabilities, for he apparently did not associate as much with professors and students as with artists—usually of the vanguard sort, e.g. Rouault, Cocteau, Satie, and Stravinski; with philosophers, such as Berdyaev and Marcel, writers like François Mauriac, those interested in mysticism, and with missionaries.<sup>74</sup> He was an early defender of Satie's music and of Rouault's painting, even to the point of writing *Art and Scholasticism*<sup>75</sup> in defense of the latter's radical change of painting style, which offended the sensibilities of the academy artists.

When we are told that we cannot be metaphysicians unless we have the intuition of being, we surely are entitled to know what that intuition is like. Maritain obliges us with a description. Always ready to defend the integrity of rational knowledge, he insists, contrary to Bergson, that the intuition expresses itself within the conceptual

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<sup>73</sup> Étienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1961), 3.

<sup>74</sup> Simon, “The Growth of a Christian Philosopher,” 7; Iswolsky, *Light Before Dusk*, 85-86.

<sup>75</sup> Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism: With Other Essays*, trans. J. F. Scanlan (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930).

functions of judgment.<sup>76</sup> Yet, his description of the experience borders on the mystical:

...[It] is a very simple sight, superior to any discursive reasoning or demonstration. It is a sight whose content and implications no words of human speech can exhaust or adequately express and in which in a moment of decisive emotion, as it were, of spiritual conflagration, the soul is in contact, a living, penetrating and illuminating contact, with a reality which it touches and which takes hold of it. Now what I want to emphasize is that it is being more than anything else which produces such an intuition.<sup>77</sup>

I have often experienced in a sudden intuition the reality of my being, the profound first principle which makes me exist outside nonentity. It is a powerful intuition whose violence has sometimes frightened me and which first revealed to me a metaphysical absolute.<sup>78</sup>

Although satisfied with the term being as the correct expression of what the intuition beholds, Maritain reminds us of the term's poverty insofar as it cannot reveal all the riches banked in the intuition. It would, he avers, demand all our metaphysical elaborations, past and future, to know all the treasures contained in the concept of being. By conjoining a mental word with reality, the intellect forges the concept of *being as such*, the formal object of metaphysics.

Our senses deliver up to us diverse realities that, at a given moment, unlock the "intelligible mystery" that was hitherto concealed in them. In the introductory chapter of *A Preface to Metaphysics*, Maritain explains what he means by "intelligible mystery." The term is not self-contradictory. Mystery and understanding are not mutually incompatible terms; to think so is to fall victim to the Cartesian legacy of

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<sup>76</sup> Raymond Dennehy, "Maritain's Reply to Gilson's Rejection of Critical Realism," in *A Thomistic Tapestry: Essays in Memory of Étienne Gilson*, ed. Peter A. Redpath (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2003), 72-74.

<sup>77</sup> Jacques Maritain, *A Preface to Metaphysics* (New York: Books for Libraries, 1979), 46.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

uncompromising rationalism. To the extent that the full meaning of “being” is not a problem to be solved, it is a mystery. But it is an *intelligible* mystery, the contemplation of which provides an ever deeper understanding of being and its riches.<sup>79</sup> This is a crucial point in the assessment of the intuition of being. An intelligible mystery, just because its ontological depth can never be plumbed, is food for contemplation and thus wisdom. What the contemplative learns about the object of his contemplation will never be falsified or revised by the discovery of new data, for there are no new data, only the reality of the object, whether it be being, beauty, truth, love, or personhood. Unlike objects of contemplation, objects of discursive reasoning are held hostage by the empirical data that constitute evidence. The discovery of new data can cause a revision of a scientific theory, say, or even lead to its falsification. For example, until recently, it was supposed that all dinosaurs were reptiles, but today there is mounting support for the claim that at least some dinosaurs were warm blooded.<sup>80</sup>

Contrast someone whose knowledge of Mahler’s Third Symphony is limited to an occasional listening over the years with one who regularly listens to it, contemplates it, focusing his attention on this or that chord or rhythm. On a given evening, both are present at the performance of the symphony; each hears the same notes; and yet, the lover of Mahler grasps its treasures in a way that the dilettante cannot. Granted, intuition has levels of penetration, and the higher the object of intuition, the greater, more profound, are its ontological treasures. But even humbler objects will evade our desire for complete and final knowledge. As Maritain, paraphrasing Aquinas, observed, “We shall never know everything there is to know about the tiniest blade of grass or the least ripple in a stream.”<sup>81</sup> Because everything is reducible to being, it follows that being is the profoundest, and most dazzling of all the intelligible mysteries. Being is the highest of the transcendentals; beauty, goodness, and truth are simply manifestations of being. This revelation is an intellectual shock, but it is not the sole preserve of the metaphysician, for one’s soul may experience a flash intuition of her

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<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 3 ff.

<sup>80</sup> <http://dinosaurs.about.com/od/dinosaurcontroversies/i/warmblooded.htm>.

<sup>81</sup> Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, 66-67.

own existence. Sometimes, this intellectual perception is like a "mystical grace." If the intuition of being is not always a kind of mystical grace, it is, at all events, "a gift bestowed on the intellect." Not everyone, including philosophers, receives it. Maritain states that Kant never had it. He dismisses the possibility that this unevenness in distribution occurs because it is a technique hard to acquire. On the contrary, nothing could be simpler to perform. Maritain claims that it was precisely because Kant tried to acquire it by a technique that he failed to attain it.<sup>82</sup>

All of which is not to say that the intuition of being comes without any difficulty. There is a difficulty, one of attaining a degree of intellectual purification that leaves the intellect sufficiently disengaged and empty so that it listens, instead of giving answers:<sup>83</sup>

We must attain a certain level of intellectual spirituality, such that the impact of reality upon the intellect—or to use a crude metaphor, the active attentive silence of the intellect, its meeting with the real—gives the objects received through our senses (whose *species impressa* is buried in the depths of the intellect) a new kind of presence in us; they are present in a mental word, another life, a living content which is a world of trans-objective presence and intelligibility. Then we are confronted within ourselves with the object of this intuition, as an object of knowledge, living with an immaterial life, with that burning translucence of intellectual nature in act.<sup>84</sup>

The intuition of being can be attained, not only by means of confronting the things in the world, but also by the experience of duration (Bergson), anguish (Heidegger), and fidelity (Marcel). But no matter which path one travels, one must cross the threshold, take the decisive step. Maritain tells us that this is achieved by letting go of the concrete psychological and ethical facts whose immersion in matter renders opaque our vision of the "strictly metaphysical values" concealed by them. Then we behold the reality of things, which reality can only be called "being." What makes the experience of the intuition

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<sup>82</sup> Maritain, *Preface to Metaphysics*, 48.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

of being inexpressible is that it is primordial and simple, and thus at the root of our intellectual life.<sup>85</sup>

Images of “crossing the threshold” and taking the “decisive step” echo the words of Plato where, in the *Republic*, the young men and women who were to become the philosopher kings must make the leap to behold the one thing that their teachers were unable to communicate to them, the Absolute Good. The vision of this, the ultimate reality, allowed them to see all things in their proper light and nature: goodness, the virtues, preeminently justice, how to deduce from it the best laws for the city-state, etc. Did the intuition of being allow Maritain to see and understand the world, its people and their actions in a truer light, the light of being? As shown above, his own words offer that possibility.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

What does it mean to say that the philosopher *seeks the truth*? If he is in the tradition of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, as Maritain was, he would be a moderate realist, one whose philosophizing rests, to borrow from John Wild, on three principles: (1) Things exist in the world independently of our knowledge of them; (2) we can know these things, not perfectly, but truly; (3) from this knowledge we can derive objective principles of ethical conduct. And as such, he would seek to know the truth about existence, real things, not simply the truth about mere propositions and theories. So the integrating principle between Maritain’s metaphysics and his activism can arguably be the intuition of being. Earlier it was observed that the attempt to unify two philosophies as disparate as those of Spinoza and Nietzsche, respectively, could at best result in a subjective unification, a psychological cobble, organized by dual commitments, the former an affinity for the absolute truths of metaphysics and the other a passion for the embodiment of truth and justice in the world. It was also noted earlier that a considerable difference separates practical philosophy (speculatively practical science) from philosophical activism (practically practical science). The former addresses *concepts* of human nature and dignity, justice, freedom, human rights, and political society, etc., not their actually existing counterparts. The latter

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 52-53.

addresses existing situations, but not as the result of a metaphysical deduction, and surely not as a deduction from Spinoza's essentialist metaphysics to Nietzsche's anti-system pro-vitalism! Still, at that stage of his fledgling philosophical career, these were the only two philosophies that Maritain found acceptable.

But perhaps the intuition of being is by its very nature a bridge between the highest metaphysical principles and existing finite individuals. Maritain attests to the connection between his sudden knowledge of the metaphysical absolute and of knowledge of his own self "existing outside nonentity" when experiencing the intuition of being. Now, given the reasonable belief that Maritain's search for truth embraced real things, and given that the intuition of being powerfully confronted him with a knowledge of his own existence "outside nonentity," is it not plausible that the intuition also confronted him with the existence "outside nonentity" of people and events in the world? And not only their existence, but the reality (existence "outside nonentity") of the dignity of human beings, and the reality ("existence outside nonentity") of injustice also confronted him with the power of the intuition of being?

Maritain writes that the formal object of metaphysics flows from an "eidetic visualization" of a transcendental (being) that floods everything with an intelligibility that involves "irreducible proportionality or analogy": *a is to its own act of existing (esse) as b is to its own act of existing (esse)*. In the operation of judgment (*ut exertia*) we discover "the actuation of a being by the act of existing, grasped as extending beyond the limits and conditions of empirical existence, grasped, therefore, in the limitless amplitude of its intelligibility."<sup>86</sup>

Existence (*esse*) adds nothing constituent to a being's essence, but it makes it real. Aquinas reminds us that an existing donkey is more valuable than an imaginary lion; and we know from our individual experiences that when we need a dollar to buy a ticket for the bus ride, a real dollar is more valuable than the mere idea of a dollar and even of the idea of a million dollars, simply because it is real and the ideas are not. If the intuition of being shows us the reality of ourselves and others more profoundly and richly than it could otherwise be known,

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<sup>86</sup> Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, 29-31.

then is it not worth our time to wonder if Maritain's long and impressive record of activism was fueled by his intuitive vision of the reality of things? And maybe all this was prefigured when, as a young student at the Sorbonne and protégé of Bergson, Maritain "...bore aloft through the classrooms the revolutionary torch of a passionate socialism and of the philosophy of intuition."<sup>87</sup> If so, that would still not necessarily establish a conceptual continuity between his metaphysics and his activism, but it could arguably establish an intuitive continuity between them. This would provide a sturdier connection than that of a subjective or psychological, continuity of what could be, at best, no better than a merely diplomatic alliance between the philosophies of Spinoza and Nietzsche. And it would have conferred an internal, ontological—as opposed to Spinoza's merely formal—logic between his metaphysics and activism to replace his admiration for the integrity of two men whose philosophies could not be farther apart.

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<sup>\*87</sup> Raïssa Maritain, *We Have Been Friends Together and Adventures in Grace*, 80.