

The Air We Breathe

The Reality of Our Knowledge and Our Knowledge of Reality

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As a philosopher and a father of two teenage daughters, I regularly find myself reflecting on the kinds of things that influence their developing personalities. And not only their minds, their thinking and their ideas, but their hearts and souls as well—those things that fashion and shape their values and ideals, their passion for life, and the things they come to care for and love.

As parents, we know that what children are taught in the school curriculum has an important influence on their developing minds. So too are the influences of peer pressure and their choice of friends. And yet, equally if not more significant, are the effects from the entire matrix of their cultural environment: music and song lyrics, MTV, the internet, violent video games, chat rooms, and the subjects and images of TV shows, movies, teen magazines, and all the various and sundry forms of advertising, not to mention the seemingly endless hours of telephone. Of course, experts keep telling us that these teen behaviors and pop-culture influences are normal for teens of any generation...that is, until there is tragedy. Enter the Columbine High School tragedy and the parade reverses direction; amid the national soul-searching, society's pundits then ponder, caution, and lament the significance of the influences that so many aspects of popular culture may be having on the minds of these young adults.

Certainly, this national self-reflection and public dialogue is not new to parents who regularly struggle with the tension between allowing for their child's independence for self-growth on the one hand, and providing the necessary structure and restrictions to protect and direct, in a values-oriented way, their child's development and habit-formation on the other hand. As a result, since one frequently encounters parents who themselves embrace popular culture in an *uncritical* way, the task of raising children/adolescents today is especially difficult for those who *are* reflective about the influence that popu-

lar culture may be having on them. This is particularly noteworthy since the force of this influence can be detrimental in two ways: first, because of the way that it too easily can alienate young adults from the very people—their parents, teachers, and concerned others—who would seek to cultivate in them a critical mind; and secondly, because of the natural attraction and the immediate, self-gratifying titillation that the thrills of popular culture can provide.

As a way of addressing this problem, I use a metaphor with my own daughters, as a way of helping them to understand the silent, subtle, unassuming, yet pervasive influence of popular culture on their thinking and on the values and beliefs that they otherwise might come to possess uncritically: if you are in a crowded, smoke-filled room, I remind them, you cannot help but come away smelling of smoke—it's *the air you breathe*. Fortunately, they get the point: in this age of awareness about the health risks of smoking, the metaphor reveals to them that it is not only their clothing and their hair that smell of smoke; indeed, they understand that second-hand smoke becomes a part of them too just as an uncritical absorption of popular culture may become a part of them. As parents, we may be glad that they get the point; as philosophers, we grow thoughtful about the epistemological significance of this metaphor and the problem that it raises.

For philosophers of common sense, our reflection upon examples and analogies drawn from nature can provide useful instruction and a reliable starting point. For example, since all living beings have an intrinsic principle of their coming-to-be, there is a unique confluence in them of their formal, efficient, and final causes: what they are (formal cause) also specifies both the means and manner of their growth (efficient cause) and the end toward which the fulfillment of their nature is directed (final cause). The inner dynamism or *energeia*, which operates unerringly for the organism's well-being, will succeed to the extent that the necessary *extrinsic* conditions, specified by the organism's nature, are adequately met and fulfilled. Thus, a tomato plant that has nourishing, balanced soil and adequate rainfall will grow to be a thriving, seemingly healthy plant, yet without the necessary and proper amount of sunlight also required by its nature, this particular plant will not bear fruits: all of the proper external environmental conditions must be satisfactorily met in order for any natural living being to completely fulfill its nature.

This insight becomes more complex, of course, when applied specifically to human beings. As Mortimer Adler points out in his book, *Ten Philosophical Mistakes*,¹ our human nature is properly defined by its spiri-

¹ Mortimer J. Adler, *Ten Philosophical Mistakes* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1985), pp. 156-66.

tual/intellectual powers, and as such, humans are not merely the products of their physical environment alone. Although cultural and individual differences are products of nurture, that does not tell the whole story: our distinctive human activities and operations are but the actualization of our two uniquely human spiritual powers, the intellect and the will. These powers may vary nurturally for both individuals and cultures. Like plants, *though not our bodies only*, all of our innate human powers or potentialities are influenced in their drive toward their fulfillment by all of the various factors that affect the many dimensions of our being. On the lower level of application, for example, few would have difficulty understanding the influence of the effects of the foods we eat and the air we breathe on our physical health; more difficult, however, is the analogous application of this principle (that “we are what we eat”) to those myriad factors which influence our emotional, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual health as well. Arrestingly, this is precisely the claim implied by the Thomistic epistemological notion of intentionality: namely, that “the knower becomes one with the object known,” or more precisely, “*the knower in the act of knowing is the known itself in the act of being known.*”²

If this is correct, as philosophers, we are then led to reflect upon the reality of human knowledge, and consequently, on our knowledge of reality—that is, on the way in which the Thomistic notion of intentionality might shed light on the way in which our cultural environment influences the nurtural outcome of who we—and our children and community—are?

The Reality of Our Knowledge

One way to understand the reality of human knowledge is to survey the topography of human knowledge; to distinguish and identify the pieces and parts of the epistemological landscape, so to speak. Specifically, there are at least nine important distinctions that Thomistic philosophers of common sense might identify in this regard. Two such philosophers, Jacques Maritain and Mortimer J. Adler, have, at one time or another, written about them all.

First, if humans are indeed unified, intellectual beings, then, as Maritain has shown in *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*,³ human sense knowledge and, indeed, all of our related human knowing powers are always under the illuminating light of the human intellect. This is especially true of our human

² Jacques Maritain, *The Range of Reason* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), p.14.

³ Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 106-11.

sense powers which, although nominally the same as their corresponding powers in brute animals, are nonetheless fundamentally different: any notion of “pure” human sensation is but an abstractive myth, since it is always the distinctive human “I” who has sense experience. “The universe of pure sensation,” Maritain’s pupil and friend, Yves Simon, wrote, “is an inhuman universe that becomes human only to the extent that sensation is penetrated by thought.”⁴ Maritain’s own writing on epistemology remained constant concerning this insight throughout his long career. As early as the second edition of *Art and Scholasticism* (1926), Maritain identified “intelligentiated-sense;”⁵ in *Untrammelled Approaches*, his last book, he refers to it again while adding a reference to “intelligentiated-imagination.”⁶ Human intelligence, as a power and act of our unified human nature, permeates all human knowledge.

The second distinction concerns the word knowledge itself. As opposed to opinion, Mortimer Adler points out that, strictly or technically speaking, the term knowledge ought to be reserved for conceptual knowledge—those judgments that are either self-evidently true, experimentally true, or “asserted to be certainly or probably true as conclusions of valid inference or correct reasoning.” All other judgments, he says, “have the status of unsupported opinions.”⁷

Despite ordinary-language usage to the contrary, this distinction between conceptual knowledge and opinion should be clear. The use of the term “experience,” however, is not so clear. Throughout his epistemological writings, Maritain consistently emphasized the important role of “experience/knowledge,” (which “is more experience than knowledge”⁸), in the full or complete understanding of human life. Here, Maritain provides a valuable insight which reminds us that “knowledge” is an analogous term and as such, he thus expands the legitimate use of the term knowledge beyond the confines of its otherwise limited, technical reference to conceptual knowledge alone. This is the third distinction concerning the vast topography of human knowledge and it addresses the vast topic of connaturality. Beginning with *The Situation of Poetry*⁹ (1937), and running through *Redeeming The Time*¹⁰ (1938),

⁴ Yves R. Simon, *An Introduction to Metaphysics of Knowledge* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990), p. 115.

⁵ Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1962), p. 164.

⁶ Jacques Maritain, *Untrammelled Approaches* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), p. 348.

⁷ Mortimer J. Adler, *Intellect* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1990), p. 155.

⁸ Jacques Maritain, *The Situation of Poetry* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955), pp. 44-51.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 64-66.

¹⁰ cf. Jacques Maritain, *Redeeming the Time* (London: G. Bles, The Centenary Press, 1943), pp. 225-55.

*Existence and the Existent*¹¹ (1947), and *The Range of Reason*¹² (1951), Maritain offered many different and over-lapping enumerations of the five various types of connatural or experiential, non-conceptual knowledge.¹³

A discussion of the various kinds of connaturality leads directly to a fourth distinction, which concerns the uses of the term "intuition." Maritain's inventory of the ways in which this term is used divides between Philosophical or Intellectual intuitions (of which there are five¹⁴) and Non-Philosophical or "Divinatory" intuitions (of which there are four¹⁵). While Maritain notes that the notion of connaturality is confined to the non-philosophical forms of intuition, the term intuition itself is more universal—so much so, in fact, that it is often confounding. It is, Maritain writes, "one of those [words] which have [sic] provoked ... the most misunderstandings and obscurities."¹⁶ Yet, despite the risks, the value and importance of this notion should not be minimized: in *Untrammelled Approaches*, Maritain writes emphatically that "there is no knowledge without intuitivity."¹⁷

The fifth distinction concerns the relation between the intellect and the will or affective desire. We ought not forget, Maritain reminds us, that love too has eyes, either by moving the intellect toward what is loved, or by becoming for the intellect, through a "spiritualized emotion" (or "affective resonance") "a determining means or instrumental vehicle through which [what is loved, is] . . . grasped and known obscurely."¹⁸

In addition to these five distinctions, classical Thomistic epistemology includes at least four more. They concern the distinctions between: 6) the three acts of the mind—apprehension (or conception), judgment, and reasoning; 7) the three degrees or levels of abstraction;¹⁹ 8) the two types of activity of logical reason, induction and deduction; and 9) the five intellectual vir-

¹¹ Cf. Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1948), pp. 70-71.

¹² Cf. *The Range of Reason*, pp. 16-18, 22-29.

¹³ Cf., John G. Trapani, Jr., *The Interrelation of Poetry, Beauty, and Contemplation in the Philosophy of Jacques Maritain*, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International, 1984), pp. 58-77.

¹⁴ Jacques Maritain, *Bergsonian Philosophy and Thomism*, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955), pp. 149-51; see also *The Interrelation of Poetry, Beauty, and Contemplation*, pp. 58-65, 76.

¹⁵ *The Interrelation of Poetry, Beauty, and Contemplation*, pp. 58-65, 76.

¹⁶ *Bergsonian Philosophy and Thomism*, p. 148.

¹⁷ *Untrammelled Approaches*, p. 326.

¹⁸ *Creative Intuition*, p. 124.

¹⁹ Cf. Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), pp. 37-50.

tues—three speculative (*nous*, *episteme*, and *sophia*), and two practical (*phronesis* and *techne*).

We might hope to be pardoned for this perhaps tedious epistemological cartography by recalling that, in his essay, “No Knowledge Without Intuitivity,” Maritain uses a similar metaphor: epistemological map-making, he says, is an exercise carried out by “cartographers.” Yet theirs is a task preceded by the work of a reconnaissance team—those who must first assay the landscape, in order to find the successful route for the explorer to take. In this example (and despite Maritain’s own admission of its limitation), we may take the landscape as reality, the journey is the intellect’s pursuit of some aspect of truth about reality (“our knowledge of reality”), the explorer is the human mind in search of that truth, the cartographer’s work is that of the intellectual, abstractive reason which sets forth its knowledge systematically (“the reality of our knowledge”), while the reconnaissance team represents the intellect’s intuitivity—its immediate contact and *experience* with reality, which points the way for the explorer and the cartographer to proceed with veracity and to avoid what is potentially erroneous.²⁰

All of this having been said, and despite whatever satisfaction this technical, epistemological analysis might provide for the philosopher in the father, the father in the philosopher is still left wondering: does this systematic mapping of human knowledge have anything to say about the influence of the pop-culture environment, as *the cultural air we breathe*, on the growth and development of society, young and old alike? In other words, if the range of human knowledge and experience is broad, then mustn’t the key to a successful cultural critique be equally as broad and comprehensive concerning the impact that our present culture may have upon us, especially if we fail to keep a critical perspective?

Our Knowledge of Reality

In order to answer these questions, we will do well to return to the Thomistic idea of intentionality. Lived-experience suggests that these cultural forces do affect us *and become part of us* just as surely as being in a smoke-filled room affects the stench of our clothing and the purity of the air we breathe. The Thomistic notion of intentionality states that the knower becomes one with the object known in such a way that the abstractive essence of what is known exists in an analogously different way in the knower than its existence in material reality. If this is true, we might then ask: does

²⁰ Cf. *Untrammelled Approaches*, pp. 314-20.

this technical use of the notion of intentional existence also work for things like values and those aspects of our culture that influence us unawares? Does reflection upon all of the various diversities and modes of knowledge previously surveyed permit a *non-technical* extension of this Thomistic notion of intentionality which might shed some light on the cultural conditions under which our many various knowing powers are actuated? In short, is there a way to understand and explain this subtle cultural experience and influence from within the framework of traditional Thomistic epistemology?

Thanks to the insights of Jacques Maritain and Mortimer Adler, I think there is. Although all knowledge *begins* in and through sensation and phantasms,²¹ we have seen that knowledge and experience are by no means limited to that of which we have sensation and phantasms; nor is the intellect, in its diverse ways of knowing, restricted to speculative knowledge or conceptual understanding alone. In ordinary lived-experience, the greater percentage of our lives is under the influence of the various kinds and degrees of practical knowledge, some of which are conceptual, and some of which are non-conceptual and affective. And yet, covering all of these diverse kinds and modes of knowledge, is the illuminating light of the human intellect and this notion of intentionality, both technically and non-technically considered. This suggests that the conceptual or experiential union that is the result of intentionality may occur on the physical, emotional, psychological, intellectual, or spiritual levels of our being. From an advertising jingle that one can't get out of one's head, to traumatic or euphoric physical or psychological experiences; from verbal abuse or positive praise to profound poetic intuitions or spiritual ecstasy—all of these experiences, as a "becoming-one-with," have the power to "stay with us," and to affect our thinking, our valuing, our loving,—our being.

Throughout this essay, we have focused on those insights of Jacques Maritain's and Mortimer Adler's epistemology which might be successfully brought to bear on a cultural critique. It is worth noting, however, that, particularly in Maritain's case, his analysis of human nature and knowledge usually focuses on the ideal: on the essence of a human nature striving toward the preordained, supernatural human end which is truth, human perfection, and the unlimited good—an end which ultimately is only completely fulfilled in the Beatific Vision. And while this theoretical analysis correctly addresses the intellectual concerns of professional philosophers

²¹"The intellect cannot understand without turning to the phantasms, first and always." cf. Étienne Gilson, *Elements of Christian Philosophy* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1960), p. 331.

interested in the arts, letters, and faith, it does not provide much direct insight for raising children and young adults, since they are primarily motivated by their desire for social acceptance, peer approval, and sensual delight—not the True, the Good, and the Beautiful.

Fortunately, this problem has a resolution. As philosophers in the Thomist tradition, we understand habits and virtues; we understand that, while “our knowledge of reality” involves the complexity and richness of the universe with which we become unified affectively and intellectually, in the end, we also understand that it is the actualization of our various and diverse knowing powers *through the cultivation of good moral and intellectual habits* that affects the predominance of our ordinary lives. And for as much as the epistemological mapping, categorizing, and explaining might matter to philosophers, it is the critical reflection upon the influence of our environment, inclining us either toward or away from the development of those good moral and intellectual habits or virtues, that matters to parents.

Here at last lies the solution to the problem we have been considering: different people in various places on earth, while the same in their spiritual, intellectual nature, can come to a happy and good fulfillment of their nature (. . . or not), depending upon the nurtural conditions of their cultural environment. Those factors which contribute positively to their physical/biological, emotional/psychological, intellectual/affective, and spiritual well-being are good and healthy; those that do not, are not. Mortimer Adler makes this point perfectly clear: our intellectual powers (both speculative and practical), when exercised in habitually wholesome ways, cultivate in us intellectual and/or moral virtues. The powers themselves are naturally ordered toward truth and goodness.²² When these intellectual or moral powers are not nurtured or not nurtured in habitually wholesome ways, the corresponding virtue-potential for these powers is not actualized, and their non-use or misuse results in intellectual or moral vice. Moreover, since vice runs counter to the human good which is obtained through the fulfillment of our human spiritual nature, our cultural/social environment, as *the air we breathe*, does matter: it leads us, through the varieties of intentional union, either toward or away from that goodness and fulfillment which our nature naturally desires.

Mortimer Adler points out that good and bad governments and societies may be assessed by the way in which they either contribute toward or away from the fulfillment of natural human needs with all of the real goods to which, being common goods, they have a natural right. He concludes:

²² Cf. *Intellect*, pp. 143-48.

The only standard we have for judging all of our social, economic, and political institutions and arrangements as just or unjust, as good or bad, as better or worse, derives from our conception of the good life for man on earth, and from our conviction that, *given certain external conditions*, it is possible for men to make good lives for themselves by their own efforts.²³

As we observed at the outset, when the environmental conditions necessary for the health and well-being of that tomato plant are not adequately met, that plant produces no, or sickly, fruits. Analogously, that basic insight may be applied to a critical understanding of our cultural environment as well: it is an observation that is as simple and as true for tomatoes as it is for ourselves, our children, our loved ones, and for the future well-being of the entire human family. And even though our human nature is not as dependent on our external environment as are tomatoes, the scriptural wisdom that “by the fruit, you shall know the tree,” may also be applied analogously here: by society’s fruits, we shall know something about our society itself—and something about the environment and culture which has nurtured it as well.

²³Mortimer J. Adler, *Desires, Right & Wrong: The Ethics of Enough* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1991), p. 193. [emphasis added.]