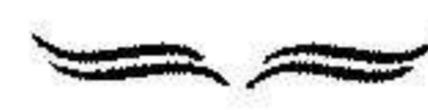


MICHAEL NOVAK

Maritain on the Void



I don't remember who first put *True Humanism* into my hands in my senior year at Holy Cross Seminary, across the highway at the University of Notre Dame, but I do recall vividly how it stunned me. That an argument this profound, ranging, and engaged had already been published and had been available for many years—and yet I had not heard of it! Some passages were so beautifully written, and others so down-to-earth and practical, I knew I was in the presence of a master. *True Humanism* offered a new horizon for thought, and a lifetime's agenda for action. My inner motto had already become "To restore all things in Christ." But I had not yet dreamt of a philosophical vision so applicable to this world now, so transformative, so future-oriented, so practical-practical.

One of the things I loved about Maritain from the first was the poetry in his philosophical writing, his sensitivity to nature and the subconscious (and preconscious). Maritain approached his craft as an artist does. In this he was more like Plato than like his beloved Aristotle. (Although doesn't Maritain remark somewhere that Aristotle's dialogues, no longer extant, were esteemed by some contemporaries as highly as Plato's? Tragic, if we have lost the literary works of Aristotle.)

Where other philosophers approach epistemology from sense perception and its deceptions, and in a most pedestrian way, Maritain did not hesitate to approach it from the side of the preconscious and the vivid knowing-in-images connatural to the poet, and also (in a different way) to the athlete, such as Aristotle's archer.

Yet it was not until recently that I was flat-out stopped by Maritain's chapter in *Ransoming the Time* on self-knowledge, natural mysticism, and the

void. These are subjects more commonly explored by novelists, poets, and dramatists in our time, than among, say, British logicians and language philosophers of the twentieth century. Maritain's reflections on self-knowledge and the void in this chapter did not wholly surprise me. I had long loved *Existence and the Existent*, and tended to see in Maritain, as in Gabriel Marcel, not a little of the existentialist awareness of the fragility of "becoming." Indeed, Maritain showed more existentialist insight than is usually indulged in by those interested merely in logic, science—in the serene world of essences and concepts.

It is evident that Maritain, as a conscious being in one staccato moment of time, well knew the sharp sense of *existing*. He was painfully aware of how fleeting our consciousness is, a mere flicker against the impassivity of the night. We are, as it were, always "standing out from" nothingness (*ex-sistens*). We know, sharply, what it is suddenly to *be* here and now, and then tomorrow not to be.

Yet Maritain did not approach the void as Albert Camus or Jean-Paul Sartre did. Not for him the haunting, shocking remembrance of murder (as in *The Stranger*) or suicide (as in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Fall*). And yet, we do seem to remember that Jacques and Raïssa had formed a pact to commit suicide together, if a deeper meaning of life did not soon unfold before them. The hundreds of thousands of dead in the trenches during the long years of the First World War cast a pall over their lives. Many of their young friends fell dead on the still smoking fields of that war—Ernest Psichari (with a bullet through his head on his first day of battle) among them. They had experienced the meaningless of the 1920s, and of most of the philosophers, too, except for Bergson.

No, Maritain began not with personal experience, nor with "self-knowledge" in the existentialists' manner, nor even in the Socratic manner. Rather, he began with metaphysical inquiry into the interrelated meanings of intellectual substance, subsistence, contingent existence, and the human subject. This reflection led him to human consciousness, which is such that we see out of the corner of our eye, or with a kind of backward awareness, a glimpse of something unsettling deep within us. Right in the core of our being is the taste of our own nothingness.

Maritain's essay on the void in the last chapter of *Ransoming the Time* is a complex one, and on a then relatively unknown topic. In such cases, it was typical of his method to array on the terrain of argument the pieces he

needed to make his point clear. At each stage, he also scouted the terrain, and warned the reader away from traps and swamps in which the advance of his arguments, and their reinforcements, would otherwise be lost.

The reader notices on the first page that Maritain is working in a strange sort of light that comes from outside philosophy itself, namely, his awareness of a theological background that in this essay he cannot pause to explore. What he needs, though, is to hold this light in the background as a measure of the human subject and the void. He needs to show the *difference* between a mysticism that arises out of the nature of the intelligent subject, and a mysticism that arises out of the superabundance of Light and Love that possesses some humans, from beyond nature itself. In order to measure natural mysticism, he needs to keep aware of what is so different from it, the mysticism that springs from God's own freely given, undeserved action.

This supernatural mysticism, which Maritain is aware of in the world around him, he knows, is not *against* human nature but springs from *beyond* it. He knows this from mastering in his youth the reports of his beloved Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Avila. There is some hint in the chapter (in his clarity about boundaries) that he knows this also from his own experience. But he never goes into that.

As the essay progresses, it becomes clear that Maritain's immediate interest here is not the Western experience of "being and nothingness" that Jean-Paul Sartre writes about. Rather, it is the trustworthy record and fairly detailed reports of the Hindu and Buddhist experience of the *void*.

This experience is what Maritain wishes to explore. Almost right away he notes that the Hindu experience of the void is not the experience of a *superabundance* of Life, Love, and Light. It is, as the word they choose makes vivid, the experience of a void. Nonetheless, can this experience be, in its authentic forms, an analog of the supernatural mysticism? Can it even rank as a valid form of natural mysticism? Rather surprisingly, Maritain's answer to both questions, typically generous but carefully explained, is Yes.

Maritain is not asking these questions in solitude. He is part of a vigorous and very high-level intellectual conversation. He considers two leaders in particular, whose work he has found helpful. The first, Père Maréchal, in answer to a question posed by Maritain at a conference, gives the latter confidence that even his disagreement with that colleague is worth pursuing. The second, Père Gardeil, has a rather more substantial position,

about which a longer discussion is necessary. Here, too, Maritain begs to disagree, and advances the discussion quite a lot further with careful argumentation.¹ It is not necessary for us to recapitulate these steps here. But it is important to note that Maritain was working in a powerful collegial enterprise. Not they alone, but also Friedrich Nietzsche, Herman Hesse (*Siddhartha*), and others were writing about the Buddhist and Hindu experience of the void. At least a few in the West were discovering the East.

I. The Preliminary Circling

I have already mentioned that Maritain needed to marshal his troops of argumentation on the table, and to explore the terrain of argument. This latter move required circling back and forth on the climb up the mountain, and it took at least three switch-backs.

The first point Maritain needed to make clear is that human knowing is an act of many kinds and degrees. He needed to remind his readers that knowing is not limited to language and logic, or even to the sense of "empirical" then governing many of the philosophers working in Europe and America. Thus, he made clear that we all have experience of a knowing that comes by "connaturality," that is, a habit shaped to, and shaping, our nature and our actual practices.

For example, take golf and archery. Lying as he is on the short but difficult approach to the fifth hole of a golf course, which club does the veteran and highly skilled golfer choose for his next shot? Which club is best suited to *him*, and to this peculiar terrain (a hill, a clump of trees, the inlet of a small lake) on this particular shot?

Then the experienced and highly skilled archer (a beautiful example from Aristotle). Which arrow from his quiver does the skilled Bowman select, and how hard does he strain his bow, and in what manner should he take account of the distance and the wind, in order to "hit the mark"?

Nobody can reasonably deny that there is a certain kind of knowing involved in these actions, in which a neophyte is not likely to share. This knowing is an everyday adaptation of the golfer's and archer's practice of their crafts. The same with the surgeon's craft. The sure knowledge that comes by

1. See Jacques Maritain, *Ransoming the Time*, translated by Harry Lorin Binsse (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), 264, 268-69, 272.

experience makes a large difference in outcomes, especially in difficult cases.

Another sort of knowing lies in the art, habit, and practice of the poetic eye and hand. The role of the imagination and the artist's subconscious fund of images and experiences plays here a larger role than in conceptual or logical reasoning. So does a quite different approach to words—in the one case, seeking the univocal and the literal and most economical expression (by the rule of Ockham's razor), suited to impersonal scientific discourse. And, in the other case, seeking the richest possible play of analogy and symbol, in order to awaken the many layers of the subconscious, and to produce an entirely different form of expression. Poetic, not scientific.

Some philosophers, alas, have been known to restrict philosophy, and certainly the empirical sciences, to the barest, cleanest forms available in logic and language. Maritain finds in his own experience that that choice does not do justice to human knowing. When Dante writes: "In His will our peace," and "L'amor' che muov' il sol' ed altre stelle,"² he and his readers participate in a knowledge far richer with analogy and implication and networks of human experience and thought than A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic*. Maritain discerns a kind of knowing in poetry that is of very high value to the philosopher, and is present in one poet more than in another, and in one poem more deeply and richly than in another.

One of my favorite lessons from my own experience was the distinguished philosopher from Cornell who wrote that it was no form of "knowing" that led him to choose to marry his wife; rather, it was an *emotive* decision. That did not seem to me to be true in fact. The couple seemed to have a steady and well-bonded life together. It seemed to me to tell against his theory of knowing. I for one know quite well how much thought I put into the judgment, and my future wife even more (I came to the conclusion rather more quickly than she did), that Karen and I ought to, indeed must, marry. I know it was not emotive, but reasoned, sometimes painfully reasoned. I even remember making a list of "Why?" and "Why not?" Don't try to tell me I did not know what I was getting into, or that a long self-examination and multifaceted judgment was not involved, more complex than any I had ever put into solving a trigonometry problem, or into discerning the validity of Kant's synthetic and analytic judgments. (I spent a whole semester under Morton V. White on that one.)

2. *Paradiso*, cantos 3 and 33.

So also, Maritain discerns, a kind of knowing of the self occurs in natural mystical knowledge, notably that (less known in the West) of the Hindu sages. By a kind of long and practiced asceticism, not easily learned or mastered, these mystics come at the end of their ascent into highly disciplined intellectual air—to what? What is the fruit of their deepest insight?

Theirs is an extraordinarily disciplined use of senses, imagination, memory, and intelligence itself. Some of the categories of Saint John of the Cross help to elucidate what they are doing—the dark night of the senses, of the imagination, of the memory, and of the searching intelligence.³ Of course, the dark night of which Saint John of the Cross writes seeks a far different quarry from that sought by these sages.

What they do find, the Hindu sages themselves say, is the void. Not the “nothingness” of which so many in the West write. But something far more emptied out of sense knowledge, images, feeling, memories, or any object of conception. And yet, a certain knowledge worthy of the name “self-knowledge.” Maritain analyzes this knowing as a kind of reflexive awareness of, or backward glance at, the self which has been deliberately and with great skill emptied of all knowing.

It is manifest that this sort of natural mysticism, which Maritain is led to judge authentic, is well attested to, and subject to all sorts of, external tests (administered by others, skilled guides themselves) to detect fraud, illusion, and self-deception.

Thus, even while this experience of the void is the direct opposite of the Jewish and Christian experience of the superabundance of the Being, Light, and Love of the divine—and thus is essentially different from it—Maritain still finds it an acceptable analog, here in nature, of the experience of God given to us from beyond our nature. Both involve an obscure knowledge of the self. Both are protected by many tests administered by other skilled guides.

And yet the one comes by way of emptying out the self so as to have as object nothing but the self, emptied of all its perceptions, images, and concepts. The other comes from without, from the in-pouring presence of the Lord of all being, knowing, and loving. But, of course, this Lord is so disproportionate to every form of human knowing—so far beyond our own

3. See Saint John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, translated and edited by E. Allison Peers (New York: Image, 2005).

humble wavelength—that in His possession of us we too are emptied of all other forms of knowing.

As St. John of the Cross puts it in “The Dark Night of the Soul” (I paraphrase):

I sought Him everywhere,
Yet as I ascended to the top of the stair
Where I found Him,
No one was there.

“No one sees God,” Saint John writes in his First Epistle (1 John 4.12). No knowing of ours is on His wavelength. If we did detect Him, our fuses would be blown out, utterly destroyed.

There is a third switch-back necessary to Maritain’s advance. He needs to point out the difference between the Idealist and the Realist conception of the subject and the object. In an odd way, modern philosophers after Descartes have separated the two—mind over here, body over there; the subject over here, object over there—and created for themselves the problem of how to re-unite them (the so imagined “mind-body problem”). Despairing of a solution, the strict rationalists go one way, the strict empiricists the other, each choosing its preferred route to “reality.” Yet in both, object remains separate from subject. For instance, some speak of “objective” as opposed to “subjective” knowing—and in more than one sense of these, at that.

Aristotle and Aquinas, but not all of the ancients and medievals, have a very different view of knowing. From their own experience, they know knowing as a unity of mind and matter, and also of subject and object. “The mind is in some way all things,” Aristotle writes in a breathtaking proposition.⁴ And the mind becomes one with all things by knowing them, by letting them come inside ourselves by sense perception and intellection, and then through discernment and judgment casting off what the evidence does not permit. In this way, the knower and the known are one. The subject and the object become one. The mind and the body are one.

For myself, I find Lonergan’s experiential description of realism in *Insight* better, more detailed, closer to experience, than Maritain’s description (recorded in many places, including *The Degrees of Knowledge*). It is quite clear to me, who loves both writers, that they are playing in the same ball-

4. *De anima* 3.5.

park. Only, in my view, here Lonergan plays with greater precision, with more satisfactory grounding in experiences anyone can replicate, and with a winning crispness. On the other hand, I find Maritain much Lonergan's superior in writing about the archer, the surgeon, the lover, and the poet. And natural mysticism.

Only when all these turns have been made does Maritain's defense of the authenticity of Hindu and Buddhist mysticism ring true. To sum up: Such knowing is a form of natural mysticism, a form of valid and extremely valuable knowing, and it is not the same as the very different supernatural—seized from above—knowing of Saint John of the Cross, Saint Teresa of Avila, and “le altre stelle.”

II. The Experience of Nothingness

My account would not be complete if I did not try to place in relation to this chapter my own researches into “nothingness” in a book entitled *The Experience of Nothingness*.⁵ There I was not writing about mysticism at all, nor about the void in the Hindu sense, but about a prosaic form of knowing that became utterly common in the twentieth century: the seemingly unshakable sense that even fourteen-year-old girls in Rio Linda have, that our lives are without meaning. “Whaddaya wanna do tonight?” “Dunno. Whaddaya wanna do?”

Some thinkers blame this widespread perception of meaninglessness on atheism and relativism. Some blame it on the technological imprint of our world on human flesh and mind. Some blame it on the tide of gross popularizations of Nietzsche and lesser nihilists. Here is the key text from Nietzsche: “What does nihilism mean? That the highest values devalue themselves. The aim is lacking; ‘why?’ finds no answer.”⁶

Some philosophers think that ideas govern the world. There is some truth to that. But it is also true that inhibitions and desires, passions and restraints, govern the broad world. Which has more power: ideas, or passions and desires? It is a good question. But Saint Paul is rather convincing when he invites our own self-knowledge onto the field: “The good that I know I

5. Michael Novak, *The Experience of Nothingness* (1970; New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1998).

6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, translated by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, edited by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), 9.

should do, I do not. Those things that I know I should not do, I do" (Rom 7.15). Knowledge and passions run in different directions.

Even for Aquinas, *caritas* is the form of all the virtues in a way different from the way in which *phronesis* (prudence) is the form of all the natural virtues.⁷ For the ultimate seat of *caritas* is the will: to love is to will the good of the other *as other*.⁸ (Those last two words are the hard part. No matter how close you are, think how *other* your spouse is from you.)

Thus, in certain recurrent circumstances, the will is a better guide for the intellect than the intellect alone. To love one's best friend well is to hone in on nuances that your intellect alone does not detect. To love the subject one studies is to raise mightily one's probabilities of learning it well. To have a true love, like a North Star, steadies the intellect even when it grows faint, or strays aside. Love very often guides intellect.

Of course, the persuasiveness and decisiveness of intellect are also frequently observed, as we have seen above in the example of judging that this woman, or this man, is the one to commit oneself to for life. Every love, to keep true, very much needs the scrutinizing examination of keen intelligence and sound judgment.

Our present widespread sense of meaninglessness—that invisible, odorless gas seeping everywhere, as Bernanos writes—is implicit in a Godless and reductive materialist worldview. If everything is by chance, down hundreds of millions of years, and there is no purpose, no point but survival, then reason itself is a fraud. It seeks meaning, from a condition of meaninglessness.

And yet Mary Eberstadt has convinced me that we ought to look at this question the other way around. What has led us to imagine that *the world* is meaningless is the lack of reason in *our* desires and *our* passions. Marriage is too difficult, so we too quickly give up its daily grinding of willful subject against willful subject. Raising children eats up far too much time and energy (and money), so we find reasons not to do so.⁹

In this way, marriage declines as an ideal, and an imperative, and a personal asceticism. And so we substitute for it serial monogamy or simply no marriage at all. Or else, we participate in such wholesale male abandon-

7. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (ST) II-II, q. 23, a. 6.

8. See ST I, q. 20, a. 1, ad 3.

9. See Mary Eberstadt's *Adam and Eve after the Pill* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2013) and *How the West Really Lost God* (West Conshohocken, Pennsylvania: Templeton Press, 2013).

ment of the women whom they have impregnated, that 70 percent of our children in some urban areas (and in large rural areas too) now dwell under the care of a "female householder, no husband present," as the Census Bureau with exquisite sensitivity names them.

Eberstadt argues that it is not the loss of God that causes the breakdown of meaning, and morals, and marriage. Rather, it is the rejection of marriage that has caused the loss of God. When individual lives are disordered by desire and passion, without the simplest and most ordinary forms of asceticism, life does become meaningless. God has no point.

Looked at from another viewpoint, the exceedingly rapid expansion of the realm of personal choices has also, I argue, brought about a kind of vertigo. Saint Augustine wrote that looking up into the multitudes of stars, in the dark nights along the coast of Africa, made him dizzy with glimpses of infinity. He felt much, much too small. Something analogous happens to me when I walk through a university bookstore. There is a dizzying multitude of dazzling books in scores of different areas, subjects, and genres. They stagger me, they make me much too small. I could not possibly read all the books just in one limited corner of my own fields of interest, let alone become well-informed in all these spinning galaxies of subject matters.

It is the same when a young person faces the choice of vocation. She imagines one path, then tosses it aside as not quite right. Then another. Then another. Then another. Finally, it does not seem to matter, really. Life is a dart board, a game of chance, one goes with the flow. All is flux, did not some Greek philosopher write?

The multiplicity of freedoms today causes the dizziness of meaninglessness. By contrast, before they were born, the life courses of my ancestors, and yours, were seemingly laid out for them long in advance, as if by eternal decree or, what comes to the same thing, "just the way things are." Pray, pay, and obey.

Not to put too fine a point on it, democracy and capitalism have blown open a sky-full of choices for our young people. No wonder sophomores feel disoriented, and find it hard just to get out of bed. What does anything matter?

Freedom itself brings a feeling and a fear of meaninglessness. There is so little one *must* do. Life seems to have no direction. Just choices, one damn choice after another. Everyone claims to want liberty, Dostoevsky wrote. Just

give it to them. They will start giving it back. Freedom is too much to bear.

That is why nihilism today—relativism if you will—is not just a theory or an idea but a daily experience. I might as well have called my book, *The Experience of Meaninglessness*. But to my ear, “Nothingness” conveyed a much deeper strain in our tradition. In the deepest sense, the sense of nothingness is rooted in our unlimited desire to know. Everything we meet, every answer, we must question. Our minds are made for the infinite. Yet the infinite is so vast, and we are so small. It is not surprising that we all feel moments of weariness, fatigue, dizziness, disorientation. We all feel “the fingers on the windowpane” as the night darkens and the rain falls. We all sense the need for lights, music, action, movement, anything to keep away the insistent silence with its troubling questions. The gnawing of the finitude, the nothingness, within us.

Mostly, in *The Experience of Nothingness*, I argue that this experience is a wonderful experience, a gift to be welcomed. *Creatio ex nihilo*. Nothingness is where creation begins. The fact of relativity does not imply the imperative of moral relativism. It exalts the role of creating our own lives. We begin in nothingness, and of our own choice begin to act in this way, not in that, by the light that is given us. Of course, the choice we make may be wrong; we *could* have chosen a different course. But that is what freedom is, isn't it—risk, fragility, the possibility of learning from experience, corrigibility, and choosing anew?

The fragility of freedom is the road to full womanliness and manliness. That is what humanism is. That is what the free person is, the burden she must bear, the glory of being human in which she basks.

I think that in *The Experience of Nothingness* I also show successfully (although that is for others to judge) that the leading philosophies of nihilism, nothingness, even relativism so far presented, begin in *being*. Nietzsche's first two demands of the brave and the bold who dare to face the meaninglessness at the heart of things is that they be *honest*, and that they then have the *courage* to face what honesty sets before them. Honesty and courage, you can't have the one without the other.

But, then, how do philosophers of nothingness convey this message? *They write books*. But if they really believed that everything is meaningless, why would they undertake such an arduous activity as writing books? What possible meaning is there in telling that to others? What difference does it make?

Furthermore, the writing of books, the presentation of nihilism and relativism in universities, and movies, and songs, could not take place without a commitment to the importance of *community*. Those who have experienced the nothingness (the meaninglessness) in the eyes of others recognize their soul-mates. They live in, form, and try to expand their communities.

Fourth, besides *honesty*, *courage*, and *community*, those who write about nihilism, the *nada*, the nothingness, assume into their own practice yet another pregnant and important human commitment. They are committed to personal *freedom* "all the way down." Yet in a meaningless world, on what grounds is freedom considered to be superior to subservience? On what grounds do they consider *creativity* to be morally superior to destructiveness? They do call, do they not, for building a new world, a better world, one that flows from their vision.

Did not Hitler with his unflinching nihilism in practice, and with his race of "Super Men," and in his exaltation of "the triumph of the will," call Nietzsche's bluff? What Hitler did, of course, is not what Nietzsche meant. But if everything is meaningless, then what difference does it make *which* meanings Nietzsche chose, or Hitler chose? Where there is no truth, no being, there is only, after all, *The Triumph of the Will*. Intellect has been ruled out of bounds.

In a word, those who claim to be relativists, nihilists, and prophets of the nothingness at the heart of human life are wearing Halloween costumes. They really do have values underneath their discoveries and their expositions and their exhortations. They really do act as if honesty has more being in it than dishonesty, that courage stands out from nothingness more than cowardice does, that community is actually on a superior plane of being than passive, atomic human individuals, blown about like dry leaves (in Dante's image) before the gates of purgatory.

They really do demean other philosophies as anti-human and destructive, rather than (what they honor) creative. They call other philosophies "anti-freedom," as if freedom has more value, more *being* in it than unfreedom.

What do our modern proponents of nihilism lack, then, but self-critical knowledge about their own hidden philosophy, to prevent them from being taken as philosophers of being (though under Venetian disguise). They seem in fact—with their appeals to honesty, courage, community, and freedom—to be heralds of a renaissance of integral humanism, or at least of its

beginnings. They preach non-being, but despite themselves and in practice, their arguments will not work without hidden appeals to powerful forms of being and acting: honesty, courage, community, freedom.

Do what they do, not what they preach.

III. Conclusion

The broad popular diffusion of modern nihilism, through the culture of the media, presents us with a marvelous “teaching moment.” Buried in the experience of nothingness are important habits of a new humanism—honesty, courage, community, creativity, freedom. On these, a new civilization may be built.

Albert Camus imagines his lifetime task as finding a way out of the ruins of our time, the ruins left behind by the nihilism of Lenin, Hitler, and Mussolini into which he had been thrust. He learned this when a young friend of his in Marseilles was strangled to death with a piano wire by the Gestapo. There are nihilisms, and then there are nihilisms, Camus thought then. And some of them must be opposed till death.¹⁰

Born into much the same world, Jacques Maritain imagined his lifetime task, and ours, as “Ransoming the Time.” No one can say the intellectual opportunity to do so is not in our hands.

10. See, for example, *The Rebel* (1951).