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SOCIAL TURN



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## Maritain on Education



In this relativistic and (paradoxically) scientific age, a prominent trend in education is to offer a smorgasbord of courses instead of a well-designed and sustaining menu. Emphasis is placed on standards of learning, psychological tests, and measurements and standardized assessments while classical languages, music, and art are abolished from the curriculum. Higher education is often valued merely as a means to earning a living. In such an environment, the question, "What is a human being?" seems strangely out of place, not a question that has anything to do with education.

Yet, Maritain, in the series of lectures titled *Education at the Crossroads*, given at Yale in 1943 and later issued as a book,<sup>1</sup> urges that this is a foundational question, a question that must be asked and answered correctly, if education is to fulfill its fundamental task of guiding the individual to a fully human life.

The title of the book, as well as the title of the last essay, "The Trials of Present Day Education,"<sup>2</sup> might lead one to suspect that the purpose of the four essays is merely to offer a critique of educational practices and to suggest ways in which education in the United States should move forward from the "crossroads" at the end of the second world war. However, as Maritain mentions at the beginning of the first chapter, he had thought of titling the lectures, *The Education of Man*—not primitive man, or Western man, or the man of the Renaissance, but simply man.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, he is inter-

1. Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1943). This work was re-issued as a Yale Paperbound in 1960. All references in this paper are to the paperbound edition, fourth printing, 1961.

2. *Ibid.*, 88–118.

3. *Ibid.*, 1.



ested in more than specific educational practices. The two central lectures also show that Maritain's focus is on matters more fundamental and universal. He is, in fact, offering a philosophy of education founded on Greek, Judaic, and Christian sources, and especially on the writings of Aquinas. Beginning with the fundamental question, "What is a human being?" these lectures on education contain time-transcending truths about the nature and value of education.

The purpose of my essay is to reflect on the principles Maritain invokes, and also on the rich experience and insight he brings to the art of teaching. Following Maritain, this essay considers the nature of the human person, the role of tradition in education, the importance of personal freedom and its relation to external freedom, what self-perfection is and how it is to be sought, the importance of the humanities and liberal education, and concludes with some observations on the personal aspects of teaching.

While the term "education" has connotations ranging from pre-school play through university studies, and from informal interactions within a family or a group of friends or colleagues, to highly specialized technical or professional training, underlying all these is the question, "What is a human being?" If we lose sight of, or fail to answer, this question correctly, we endanger ourselves and others, as well as the educational and social structures of which we are a part.

Humans are not merely animals of nature like a skylark or bear, but animals of culture. Pindar says the task of education is to "become who we are."<sup>4</sup> Maritain says this is possible only in a society, within a civilization, within a tradition. A human being is a political animal, but also an historical animal. Humans by nature desire to know, and while the power of knowing is unlimited, or as Aristotle says, "capable of becoming all that is," nonetheless, the power advances only step by step so that one can progress neither morally nor intellectually unless aided by tradition, understood as "collective experience previously accumulated and preserved, and regularly transmitted."<sup>5</sup> Maritain holds that tradition is necessary for self-determination, not passively accepted tradition, but tradition that weighs heavily upon one and strengthens one to struggle against it. The struggle to understand and appropriate the tradition strengthens the person and enriches the tradition

4. Pindar, *Pythian 2*, line 72.

5. Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, 2.



itself; it leads to a continual, and ever-increasing spiritual enrichment of both the individual and the tradition.<sup>6</sup>

Starting from the truth that education is an art, Maritain draws attention to the nature of art in general, and then specifically to the art of education. Every art is "a dynamic trend toward an object to be achieved, which is the aim of this art,"<sup>7</sup> and if the end of education is disregarded, or not clearly conceived, education will not achieve its end. If underlying each specific educational task is the aim of helping and guiding each individual to his own distinct human achievement, the question "What is the nature of a human being?" must be addressed.

Is a human merely an intricate machine whose behavior can be exhaustively measured by empirical methods, totally explained by causal accounts, and consequently completely predictable? If this materialistic (sometimes *erroneously* called "scientific") view of the nature of a human being is accepted, questions about the human spirit, or freedom, or, even acting for reasons—as contrasted with causal explanations of behavior—are ruled out. Maritain points out that trying to build education on such a "scientific" idea of man, having at our disposal only what emerges from sense observation and measurement, would be trying to draw a metaphysics from science,<sup>8</sup> but science is not metaphysics, and however valuable the results of science for human life, the nature of a human being can no more be encapsulated in a merely scientific account than can the nature of love or a work of art. Moreover, from the practical point of view, this spurious metaphysics, "disguised as science," denies or misconceives realities "without which education loses all human sense, or becomes the training of an animal for the utility of the state."<sup>9</sup> Both science and politics have a role to play in human life and education, but it is not the proper role of either to give an ontological account of the nature of the human being.

The only adequate account is the philosophical-religious account. Although Maritain endorses, and unabashedly writes from, the Catholic point of view, he recognizes that there are many different philosophical and religious conceptions of man. However, Maritain's own view is that in order to be completely well grounded, education must be based on the Christian idea of man. The essential features of this account are that a hu-

6. See *ibid.*

8. See *ibid.*, 6.

7. *Ibid.*, 3.

9. *Ibid.*



man being is an animal endowed with reason, a free individual in personal relation to God, and an imperfect being who can become more perfect through knowledge, love and grace.<sup>10</sup>

At the center of Maritain's philosophy of education is the concept of human "personality," a concept to be distinguished from "individuality." Each human is a part of the physical universe, an instance of the species, and is inescapably subject to cosmic, ethnic, and historic laws. This set of characteristics belongs to what Maritain identifies as "individuality," an undeniable aspect of a human being.<sup>11</sup> Certain practices in education such as developing "psychophysical habits, conditioned reflexes, and sense memorizations" are related to this "material individuality," and play a part in education.<sup>12</sup> However, a human being—shall we say, "person"—does not exist merely as a physical being. Education is not animal training; rather, it is "a human awakening."<sup>13</sup>

A person has a spiritual aspect that enables a more rich and noble existence through knowledge and love. Aristotle held that the psyche was the first principle of life in any organism, and specifically differentiated the human psyche by its capacity for reasoning. Christianity appropriated this Greek tradition and came to understand the human psyche as "the dwelling place of God and as made for eternal life."<sup>14</sup>

While a person is subject to the slightest accidents of matter, it is the existence of the psyche (soul, intellect, spirit) that is the root of personality. To say that one is a person implies a certain wholeness and independence not captured by the concept of "material individuality." Maritain writes, "It is this mystery of our nature which religious thought designates when it says that the person is the image of God. A person possesses absolute dignity because he is in direct relationship with the realm of being, truth, goodness and beauty, and with God, and it is only with these that he can arrive at his complete fulfillment."<sup>15</sup>

The concept of personality has wide and resounding implications for education. One of the most important is that the educator must have a respect for the person, as well as the body, a sort of "sacred and loving attention" to the mysterious identity of the other, an identity not reachable by mere techniques. This approach is not limited to the liberal arts, but can be

10. See *ibid.*, 7.

12. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*, 8.

11. *Ibid.*, 9.

13. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*



used at every age, and in every type of education, including physical training; it is, in fact, a way of humanizing education.<sup>16</sup>

According to Maritain, the central aspiration of a person is freedom understood as spontaneity, expansion, or autonomy. To the independence one gains by means of intellect and wisdom, he adds the possibility of perfection by love, articulated by St. Paul as, "the freedom of those moved by divine love."<sup>17</sup> Thus, the principal goal of education is for the person to become who he is, "through knowledge and wisdom, good will and love."<sup>18</sup> This is an internal and spiritual perfection, not totally reachable, but to be continually sought. The love of wisdom is not itself wisdom, but, as Plato noted in the *Symposium*,<sup>19</sup> it is an indispensable condition for becoming as wise as is humanly possible.

Education is a spiritual activity and therefore is intentional. The intellect seeks truth, which Maritain refers to as "the conquest of being." In a passage that perfectly captures this sense of freedom, and speaks to the value of liberal education, Maritain writes, "This conquest of being, this progressive attainment of new truths, or the progressive realization of the ever-growing and ever-renewed significance of truths already attained, opens and enlarges our mind and life, and really situates them in freedom and autonomy."<sup>20</sup>

Human thinking begins with difficulties, but also with insights; it ends in insights that then require support by argument and/or experience. Without trust in the intellect's capacity to attain truth about what and how things are, there is no effective human action. It is by having knowledge *into*, not merely *about*, the nature of things that makes possible both speculative and practical wisdom and action that strives, in however limited a way, towards unlimited good.<sup>21</sup>

Certain basic dispositions of human nature that aid one to achieve personal freedom need to be cultivated as early as possible in childhood. The first, which Maritain characterizes as the primary tendency of any intellectual nature, is the love of knowing the truth.<sup>22</sup> Also important is the love of good and justice and "even the love of heroic feats."<sup>23</sup> A third disposition is simplicity and openness with regard to existence, which Maritain describes as the attitude of existing gladly and accepting the natural limitations of

16. *Ibid.*, 10.

18. *Ibid.*

20. Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, 12.

22. See *ibid.*, 36.

17. *Ibid.*, 11.

19. Plato, *Symposium* 204b1-7.

21. See *ibid.*, 13.

23. *Ibid.*, 37.



existence.<sup>24</sup> The fourth disposition is a deep respect for the job to be done and faithfulness and responsibility in doing it.<sup>25</sup> Finally, a disposition closely related to external freedom and political obligation is the disposition of co-operation with others.<sup>26</sup> Here, we must keep in mind that Maritain is not giving a description of the dispositions that most people actually *have*; in fact one might suspect that few adults have cultivated these dispositions. Rather, as is appropriate for a philosophy of education, he is identifying the dispositions that *ought* to be cultivated.

A person naturally desires not only personal freedom, that is, intellectual and spiritual freedom, but also what may be called "external" freedom, a freedom that is linked to social life. Given that a person is a "political" animal by nature, how is personal freedom to be understood in relation to the demands that living in a society places on one? Is there a conflict between personal freedom and political obligation? Maritain answers that in fact there is not, or should not be, a conflict between these two freedoms. Social life, correctly understood, he says, subordinates the person to the common good, not in a tyrannical fashion, but in order that the common good flow back so that each person can enjoy the freedom of expansion and independence made possible by "economic guaranties of labor and ownership, political rights, civic virtues, and the cultivation of the mind."<sup>27</sup>

Development of the skills and civic virtues that enable a person to perform normal, useful, and co-operative roles in the social sphere is an *essential* goal of education, but it is not the *ultimate* goal. Far from being in conflict, the development of personal freedom is actually the foundation for social life. Human society, Maritain says, is most appropriately viewed as a group of human freedoms, accepting obedience and self-sacrifice and a common law for the general welfare. The purpose of the social group is to make it possible for each of these freedoms (persons) to reach a truly human fulfillment. The person and the social group are interrelated and surpass each other in different respects. The person serves the social group; tyranny can be avoided only if it is recognized that the person, "has secrets which escape the group and a vocation which is not included in the group."<sup>28</sup> It is in this inner core, the freedom of the person, that idealism, generosity, and respect for others are developed as well as a deep-rooted

24. See *ibid.*

26. See *ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, 15.

25. See *ibid.*, 38.

27. *Ibid.*, 14.



independence from the opinion of others. One of the ways Maritain recommends to develop this independence is the reading of books, not textbooks, but books that will increase the pleasure of the spirit, the joy of knowing, and the joy of beauty.<sup>29</sup>

Concerning the utilitarian aspect of education in the practical aim of gainful employment, Maritain admits such practical education is necessary because "the children of man are not made for aristocratic leisure."<sup>30</sup> The caution here is that specialized training must never endanger the ultimate goal of internal and spiritual freedom and that the practical aim of education is best provided by the development of the general human capacities. That many large conglomerates do not accept this view is easily born out by a close look at the inner workings of the U.S. Postal Service or the TSA, to mention but two agencies. Even in colleges and universities where one might expect to find liberal education valued along the lines suggested by Maritain, overspecialization and narrowness of outlook often prevail. However, that such conditions exist does not vitiate Maritain's view; rather, these very conditions make it more imperative that his view, and the tradition within which he writes, be better understood and more widely promulgated.

Maritain observes that specialization is increasingly needed by the technical organization of modern life, but warns that education which takes as its only, or highest, aim the formation of specialists who know only their own field and are unable to pass judgment on any matter beyond their specialized competence, would endanger the very existence of "government of the people, by the people, and for the people," the assumption being that a truly well-functioning republic requires that its citizens be generally educated. He asks, "How could the common man be capable of judging about the good of the people if he felt able to pass judgment only in the field of his own specialized vocational competence?"<sup>31</sup> He projects what he thinks would be the consequences of such specialization: "the real life of man would consist of producing in a perfectly pigeonholed manner economic values and scientific discoveries, while some cheap pleasure or social entertainment would occupy leisure time, and a vague religious feeling, without any content of thought and reality, would make existence a little less flat, perhaps a little more dramatic and stimulating, like a happy dream."<sup>32</sup> The

29. See *ibid.*, 16.

31. *Ibid.*, 19.

30. *Ibid.*, 10.

32. *Ibid.*



only remedy, if there is one, he concludes, is an early and more vigorous education in the liberal arts. The democratic way of life "demands primarily liberal education for all and a general humanistic development throughout society."<sup>33</sup> The consequences Maritain merely projected are now evident on every hand. Is this a failure of the education system? Or caused by the materialistic bent of our times? Or, a natural result of the normal curve of human intelligence? Or of all of these? The causes are complex and the implementation of the cure does not look promising. However, philosophy is not practice, and, as Plato learned from his attempts in Syracuse,<sup>34</sup> putting true insights into practice is not a task that philosophy by itself can achieve.

Maritain's philosophy of education is not an elitist view that values only liberal education. The ideal of *homo sapiens* and the ideal of *homo faber* are integrally related. The intelligence of man is not only in his head, but in his fingers, too. Sense perception is not the end of understanding; it is, however, the beginning. In a homey metaphor, Maritain suggests, "there is no place closer to man than a workshop."<sup>35</sup> Manual work provides psychological equilibrium; it also furthers ingenuity and accuracy of the mind and is the "prime basis" of artistic activity. The Socratic question, *Tis estin?* ("What is it?") that asks for an account of the nature of something is an old question; the companion question, "How does this work?" may be even older. The point, Maritain says, "is to disengage from experience the rational and necessary connections with which that experience is pregnant, and which become visible only by means of abstraction and universal concepts, and in the light of intuitive first principles of reason."<sup>36</sup>

Maritain is writing from within a rich tradition and from his unique appropriation of that tradition. He is, as he himself claims, a Thomist, but he is also a Platonist, an Aristotelian, a French intellectual, and a philosopher, who, by the time he wrote the Yale lectures on education, had already been a professor of philosophy (of the contemplative sort who reflects on the art he practices) for some 30 years. He had thought about and written extensively on the principles that inform his reflections on education.

Drawing on this tradition, Maritain understands that education is an art, an especially difficult art that naturally falls within the sphere of ethics and practical wisdom. As an art, it is a dynamic process towards an end or

33. *Ibid.*, 20.

35. Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, 30.

34. See Plato, *Seventh Letter* 339a-352a

36. *Ibid.*, 46.



ends to be achieved.<sup>37</sup> From the foregoing account, it is evident that Maritain has a clear conception of the ends, taken generally, that ought to be sought by the person and by the educational structures in which the person participates. He is also aware of the attendant dangers.

In the early twentieth century, when Maritain was writing *Education at the Crossroads*, there was, especially in the public schools, a tendency to emphasize the methods of education, sometimes to the detriment of the student and the subjects to be studied. Maritain writes, "the child is so well tested and observed, his needs so well detailed, his psychology so clearly cut out, the methods for making it easy for him everywhere so perfected, that the end of all these commendable improvements runs the risk of being forgotten or disregarded."<sup>38</sup> The educational landscape has changed. Since the 1980s, the emphasis has moved from detailed testing of the student to an emphasis on the teacher. How to prepare the teacher? How to test the effectiveness of the teaching? Colleges and universities now have established centers to help teachers learn how to teach. Although the focus is altered, the emphasis is still on the method, on the *means* rather than on the *end*, or purpose, of education. It is not that the methods are bad; they may, in fact, be quite good. And herein precisely lies the danger, both in Maritain's time and in our own; the means may be so good and so interesting to pursue that one loses sight of the end. If the means are pursued and cultivated for the sake of their own perfection, and not as means to achieve the aims of education, they cease to perform their own appropriate function. The supremacy of means over ends leads to the collapse of any clear purpose in education and the loss of real efficiency.<sup>39</sup>

In closing, I quote two passages from Maritain's Yale lectures that show the aspects of teaching Maritain takes to be central to the education of the person, aspects that by all accounts were evident in Maritain's own teaching.

The first occurs early in the lectures where he is speaking of the education of the young. He writes that one of the greatest helps towards self-perfection is to have "the comforting assurance of being in some way recognized by a human personal gaze, inexpressible either in concepts or words."<sup>40</sup>

The second is a passage in which Maritain speaks of the role of intuition in teaching: "If a teacher himself is concerned with discerning and

37. Ibid., 2-3.

39. See *ibid.*

38. Ibid., 3.

40. Ibid., 41.



seeing, with getting vision, rather than with collecting facts and opinions, and if he handles his burden of knowledge so as to see through it into the reality of things, then in the mind of the student the power of intuition will be awakened and strengthened unawares."<sup>41</sup>

Both these passages are concerned with the education of youth, yet education can go on until death, and these observations are no less true of any interaction that is educative in the ultimate sense that Maritain mentions.

It is impossible in a brief essay to capture the richness and complexity of Maritain's views on education. For that, one must go to Maritain and to the tradition he appropriates, yet the principles identified in this paper, in virtue of their truth and universality, do constitute a philosophy of education worth thoughtful consideration.

41. *Ibid.*, 45.