



# FAITH & REASON

THE JOURNAL OF CHRISTENDOM COLLEGE

Summer 1991 | Vol. XVII, No. 2

---

## THE CHRISTIAN PERSONALISM OF JACQUES MARITAIN

*Donald Demarco*

---

*Dr. DeMarco illustrates in this essay how Maritain's Catholic Faith led him to develop a philosophic personalism based upon the teachings of St. Thomas. This key element in his thought may serve as a counter current to the contemporary world's exaltation of selfishness.*



ACQUES MARITAIN WAS BORN IN PARIS ON NOVEMBER 18, 1882. HE GREW UP IN THAT city, barely nourished spiritually on the lukewarm Protestantism of his mother. When he entered the Lycee Henri IV, he possessed no particular religious convictions. He enrolled at the Sorbonne in 1901 during France's rich and corrupt Third Republic, a time when rabid French anti-clericalism had turned the Church into an intellectual ghetto. The school's rigid empiricism had effectively excluded any respectful discussion of spiritual matters. One day, as Jacques walked hand in hand through a Paris park with his Jewish girl friend, Raissa, the two made a pact that if, within a year, they could not find any meaning to life beyond the material, they would commit suicide.

That despair dissolved when they heard lectures at the College de France given by Henri Bergson, whose theories of creative evolution exalted the spirit of man and his ability to discover the intelligibility of things through intuition. In 1905, Jacques and Raissa, now newlyweds, met a passionate Catholic named Leon Bloy ("A Christian of the second century astray in the Third Republic") who led them into the Catholic faith.

Maritain soon began studying the massive works of St. Thomas Aquinas. As Aquinas had found in Aristotle a philosophical basis for harmonizing human reason with Christian faith, Maritain discovered in Aquinas possibilities for bringing a rejuvenated Thomism into a modern age of skepticism and science. "The disease afflicting the modern world," he wrote, "is above all a disease of the intellect." In one of his early works, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, Maritain sought to unify all the sciences and subdivisions of philosophy in the pursuit of reality.

At the height of his fame, in the 1920s and '30s, Maritain lectured at Oxford, Yale, Notre Dame, and Chicago. He also taught at Paris, Princeton, and Toronto. After World War II, he served three years as France's ambassador to the Vatican. In 1963 the French government honored him with its National Grand Prize for Letters.

The 50-odd books that Maritain wrote, spanning a period of more than half a century and translated into every major language, earned him the distinction of being "the greatest living Catholic philosopher."

In his books, articles, and lectures, Maritain repeatedly and passionately called upon the Church to bring its theology and philosophy into contact with present day problems. His liberal thoughts concerning political and social justice issues won him bitter enemies among ultra-conventional Church thinkers. Attempts were even made, though unsuccessful, to have his books condemned by the Vatican.

Pope Paul VI honored Maritain during Vatican II, and in 1967 gave him unprecedented credit for inspiring the Pontiff's landmark encyclical on economic justice, *Populorum Progressio*. He also considered making Maritain a Cardinal,

but the philosopher rejected the suggestion.

When his beloved wife and collaborator Raissa died in 1960, Maritain withdrew to a secluded life of silence and prayer, living in a hut with the Little Brothers of Jesus at Toulouse. When he died there in 1973, Pope Paul VI described him publicly as a “master of the art of thinking, of living, and of praying.”

Maritain once referred to himself as “a man God has turned inside out like a glove.” In a letter to poet Jean Cocteau, he wrote: “I have given my life to St. Thomas, and labor to spread his doctrine. For I, too, want intelligence to be taken from the Devil and returned to God.” Indeed, no modern Catholic thinker has done more in an effort to achieve this end than Jacques Maritain.



Jacques Maritain

## THE PERSON AND THE INDIVIDUAL

In *The Person and the Common Good*, which is Maritain’s clearest and most sustained treatment of the person, he asks whether the person is simply the self and nothing more. This is an appropriate question to raise in the light of modern culture’s commonplace identification of the two. We find this identification in the various expressions of individualism which maintain that an individual has a right to pursue the objects of his desires apart from any consideration of the effect this pursuit might have on others. Jean-Paul Sartre’s celebrated phrase from his play *No Exit* - “Hell is other people” - reflects this commonplace lack of concern that self-ish people have for others. A brief glance at the list of best-selling self-help books corroborates the point: *Winning Through Intimidation*; *How to Be Your Own Best Friend*; *Having It All*; *Own Your Own Life*; *Creative Divorce*; and *Getting Divorced from Mother and Dad*.

Maritain’s question may have more validity today than ever before, given present society’s inordinate preoccupation with selfism. Numerous critics of contemporary culture have studied this phenomenon in great detail. A few notable works that come to mind are: *Culture of Narcissism* by Christopher Lasch; *Psychology as Religion*:

*The Cult of Self-worship* by Paul Vitz; *The Heresy of Self-Love* by Paul Zweig; *The Inflated Self* by David Myers; and *The Age of Sensation* by Herbert Hendin. Popular magazines and virtually all of commercial advertising are based on the notion that a human person is merely a self, a center for the experience of pleasure and the acquisition of material goods.

Novelist Thomas Pynchon captures the essence of the consuming self when he speaks of one of his characters as “walking the aisles of a bright, gigantic supermarket, his only function to want.”

Maritain refrains from being moralistic. He does not rail against the evil or narrowness of the self. He advises us not to be hasty in dismissing the self, and points out that no one can become a saint without having a strong sense of self.

He wants to take us more deeply into the issue. It appears on the surface that there is a contradiction. He refers to Pascal who asserts that “the self is detestable.” On the other hand, St. Thomas states that “Person signifies what is most perfect in all nature.” It is abundantly clear that self cannot be equated with person since that which is “detestable” cannot be that which is “most perfect in all nature.” How can this apparent contradiction be resolved?

Maritain avoids a contradiction by making a crucial distinction between *individuality* and *personality*. We should note here that what is distinguishable by the mind is not necessarily separable in reality. To take a simple example, we can mentally distinguish the right from the left sides of a piece of paper. Yet if we cut away the right hand side of the paper, we do not succeed in removing it, leaving us with a page that has only a left side. By cutting the right side, we merely have a smaller piece of paper that still has a right side in equal proportion with its left side counterpart. We cannot separate the right from the left in reality even though we can make a very useful and practical distinction between them in the mind.

So too, although we can distinguish *individuality* from *personality*, we cannot separate them from each

other in the concrete human being. It has been said of Maritain that the motto of his philosophical life was “to distinguish in order to unite.” Philosophy is to distinguish (*Philosophiae est distinguere*). But its ultimate purpose is not to decompose things into fragments, but to appreciate more profoundly the diversity within unity, the multi-faceted constitution of being, the manner in which the object of philosophical inquiry is integrated. Maritain wants us to understand how individuality and personality (which are principles, rather than independent realities) combine, like body and soul, to form a single, unified human being.

Pascal’s remark that the “self is detestable” appears in his classic work, *The Pensees*. The great 16th century scientist, mathematician, philosopher, and religious thinker explains that we hate the self because it can impose itself as the center of everything, an imposition which is in direct opposition to justice.

In short, the self has two qualities: it is unjust because it makes itself the centre of everything; it is disagreeable to other people because it tries to browbeat them; for each self is the enemy and would like to be the tyrant of all the others. You remove its unpleasantness, but not its injustice.<sup>1</sup>

Maritain argues similarly, that the material pole, which is but the “shadow of personality,” tends to draw things to itself. The spiritual pole, contrariwise, which concerns true personality, is what Aquinas has in mind when he speaks of a source of generosity and bountifulness.

The distinction between individuality and personality has roots in the ancient world. The Greeks had two words for life: bios and zoe. The former referred to individual life, the life that was contained within the singular living thing. The latter, however, referred to a transcendent form of life, life that could be shared. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity follows similar lines. Each person in the Blessed Trinity possesses his own individuality. Nonetheless, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have a superabundance of life that they share with each other in so intimate a fashion that the three together constitute a single, unified God.

More recently, Pope John Paul II has re-emphasized how marriage between man and woman is an image of the Trinity and a *communio personarum* (a communion of persons), a two-in-one-flesh union of two in

dividuals who transcend their respective singularities to share their personhood with each other in a unity that is both sacred and profound.<sup>2</sup>

Psychologist Paul Vitz has explained that the concept of the “person” is the fruit of Jewish and Christian theology. Sundered from this root, the “person” becomes truncated as a “self-actualizing individual who is devoted to the growth of the secular self.”<sup>3</sup> consequently, when Carl Rogers titles his best known work, *On Becoming a Person*, which is about the cultivation of the self-actualizing, secular self, he is simply wrong. According to Vitz, what Rogers wrote was a book “On Becoming an Individual.”<sup>4</sup>



Maritain alludes to the contribution of existentialist philosopher Nicolas Berdiaeff to the store of personalism. This outstanding Russian thinker wrote passionately and extensively about the “person.” For Berdiaeff, the notion of person captures the twofold, polarized quality of the human being. The following words could have been penned by Maritain himself:

Man is a personality not by nature but by spirit. By nature he is only an individual. Personality is not a monad entering into a hierarchy of monads and subordinate to it. Personality is a microcosm, a complete universe. It is personality alone that can bring together a universal content and be a potential universe in an individual form.... The monad is closed, shut up, it has neither windows nor doors. For personality, however, infinity opens out, it enters into infinity, and admits infinity into itself; in its self-revelation it is directed towards an infinite content.<sup>5</sup>

Having resolved the apparent contradiction by distinguishing the material and spiritual polarities, Maritain then goes on to discuss the notion of individuality in some depth.

## INDIVIDUALITY

In a fundamental sense which most people can understand, only individuals exist in the extra-mental world of concrete reality. Ideas and the like do not have

real existence, that is to say, they are not capable of exercising the act of existing. Here, Maritain is writing as an existentialist echoing the existentialism of his master, St. Thomas Aquinas. “Existence,” for the Angelic Doctor, is the “perfection of perfections”; it is that by which something becomes truly real. As “the first act” of an essence, existence concretizes an essence in reality.

We must note at this point that it is not the essence that exists (and certainly not existence that exists), but the underlying subject (or “supposit”). It is this “supposit” that exercises the act of existence and allows an essence to make its entrance into the real world. For Maritain and Aquinas, reality is composed of subjects that exercise existence and manifest an essence. This is a crucial point and allows the philosopher to distinguish real entities from those Platonic essences or ideal forms that float in a heaven of abstractions.

Individuality is, therefore, common to all things that exist. Thus, angels and God are individuals. Pure spirits are individuals by virtue of their form.<sup>6</sup> Angels, consequently, differ from each other not as taller or shorter, fatter or thinner, etc., for they have no material dimension. They differ from each other as one species differs from another, as a horse differs from a cow, for example. Spiritual beings are individuals, though they are not “individualized,” that is, “individualized by matter.”<sup>8</sup>

Human persons, because they are material, have their individuality rooted in matter. Matter in itself, however, is a mere potency to receive forms. Its nature is essentially relatable to that which can inform it. In this regard it is roughly analogous to computer hardware that is merely a potentiality for receiving the information contained in the software programming.

Because of this radically parasitic nature of matter, Maritain refers to it as in itself a kind of “non-being.” And because of its essential relatability to form, he speaks of matter as an “avidity for being.” Together, matter and form combine to form a substantial unity. The human person is a single, unified substance, a dynamic whole which is the synthesis of body and soul.

## PERSONALITY

After discussing the individual side of man, Maritain then turns to the more difficult task of expressing the meaning of his personality. He commences his treat-

ment by explaining how love is a movement that directs itself to the center of one’s personality. Love is not concerned with essences, or qualities, or pleasure, but with affirming the metaphysical center of the beloved’s personality. Love does not ignore the qualities of the one who is loved. Indeed, it is one with them. Moreover, the lover is not content to express his love in bestowing gifts which merely symbolize his love. He gives himself as a gift.

At the metaphysical center of personality is a capacity to give oneself as a person and to receive the gift of another person. This could not be possible if the lovers were not subjects capable of a subject-to-subject reciprocal affirmation. Love is sourced in the metaphysics of inter-subjectivity.

What Maritain is leading to here is a notion which has given students so many headaches, the notion of subsistence. This is a critical notion because it is needed in order to establish, philosophically, the reality of the *subject* (as opposed to the *object*). The subject, in turn, is important because only a subject can exist as a person.

The existential subject (like existence itself) eludes the powers of conceptualization. It is not an object of thought, something we can grasp intellectually. Hence it tends to be absent from many philosophies, especially those of a rationalistic bent. The intellect knows things as objects. But love moves on a different plane and loves the other as a subject. The nature of the subject is such that it transcends the operation of the intellect. In this regard, the subject is a “super-intelligible.”<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, it must be posited, for it is not the essence which exists, but the subject. Essence is that which a thing is; the subject *is that which* has an essence, *that which* exercises existence and action, *that which* “subsists.”

Subjectivity marks the frontier which separates philosophy from religion. Philosophy consists in the relation of intelligence to object; whereas religion enters into the relation of subject to subject. Love gives us the opportunity to establish person-to-person relationships. Since God is love, religion becomes a paradigm for this experience of inter-subjectivity.

Subjectivity both receives and gives. It receives through the intellect by super-existing in knowledge. It gives through the will by super-existing in love. But since it is better to give than to receive, it is through love that

a person comes to attain the supreme revelation of his personal reality. He discovers at this same time the basic generosity of his existence in which he realizes the very meaning of his being alive.<sup>10</sup>

Love, then, breaks down the barriers that keep people at a distance from each other, causing them to see one another as objects. It makes the being we love another ourself, that is to say, another subjectivity for us, another subjectivity that is ours. Love is perfective of our personalities; it helps us to achieve more completely the very purpose of our existence, which, in Maritain's words is "self-mastery for the purpose of self-giving."<sup>11</sup>

The life of personality is not self-preservation or self-aggrandizement as that of the individual, but self-development and self-giving. It presupposes sacrifice, and sacrifice cannot be impersonal. Psychological individualism, so characteristic of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is the very reverse of personalism.

Personality shares its own cultivated life with the lives of others. In the process of developing this personal communion with others, dialogue is required. Nevertheless, as Maritain points out, such communication is rarely possible. Indeed, as another personalist thinker, Martin Buber, has remarked, the fact that people "can no longer carry on authentic dialogue with one another is the most acute symptom of the pathology of our time." Hence, alienation - both personal and intellectual - seems more characteristic of modern man than loving, personal union. This unhappy state of affairs is directly tied to the material side of man whose inward gravitational pull draws him away from other people. Only persons can emerge in dialogue, because only persons are capable of participating in a common life. As individuals, people are divided and alienated from one another. As Maritain comments, "evil arises when, in our own action, we give preponderance to the individual aspect of our being."

The Catholic novelist, Walker Percy, has depicted this alienated state of modern man in his book *Lost in*

*the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book*. Like Maritain, Percy sees the roots of this predicament in the Cartesian isolation of the conscious self from its corporeal link with both its personal wholeness as well as its place in the cosmos. "The Self since the time of Descartes," he writes, "has been stranded, split off from everything else in the Cosmos, a mind which professes to understand

bodies and galaxies but is by the very act of understanding marooned in the Cosmos, with which it has no connection."<sup>12</sup>

Maritain's notion of "personality" has profound religious

(specifically Christian) implications. Through loving communication with others, the person begins to appreciate the inexhaustible richness of subjectivity. This image of the infinite implies a Source of infinite plenitude. Thus, the person is directly related to the absolute and finds its sufficiency only in an intimate relationship with God. This notion is consistent with the Biblical reference to man being made in the image of God. The "image" to which Scripture refers, is the spiritual image of God in man which makes it possible for him to know and love God and, through grace, to participate in His Life.

As a person, the human being is a whole, a synthesis of body and soul. But, as Maritain remarks elsewhere, he is an "open whole."<sup>13</sup> This opening allows for additional and higher unifications. The person tends by its very nature to social life and to modes of communion that attain their ultimate fulfillment only in the Godhead. There is a radical generosity inscribed within the very being of the person, a quality which is the essence of spirit. Nothing could be more contradictory for the person than to be alone. By the untransformable nature of its spiritual being, the person wants to know and to love. But more than that, it wants to share that knowledge and love with others. Still more, it wants this sharing to reach a level of perfection that could be realized only with God.



*"Love is perfective of our personalities;  
it helps us to achieve more completely  
the very purpose of our existence..."*



## NOTES

- 1Blaise Pascal, *Pascal's Pensees*, tr. by Martin Turnell (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), § 141, p. 78.
- 2Pope John Paul II, *The Original Unity of Man and Woman* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1981), p. 76.
- 3Paul Vitz, "Empirical Sciences and Personhood: From an Old Consensus to a New Realism," *Theological Powers and the Person*, A. S. Moraczewski et al., eds. (St. Louis: The Pope John Center, 1983), p. 191.
- 4Ibid., p. 207.
- 5Nikolai Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom*, tr. by R. M. French (New ork: Scribner's Sons, 1944), pp. 21-22.
- 6Maritain, *Scholasticism and Politics* (Garden City: Doubleday,1960), p. 65.
- 7Ibid.
- 8Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, tr. by Gerald Phelan (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1959), p. 233.
- 9Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, tr. by L. Galantiere & G. Phelan (Garden City: Doubleday, 1957), p. 71.
- 10Ibid., p. 90.
- 11Ibid., p. 89.
- 12Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984), p. 47.
- 13Maritain, *The Rights of Man and Natural Law*, tr. by Doris Anson (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1947), p. 5.

