

FALSE AND GENUINE KNOWLEDGE:  
A PHILOSOPHICAL LOOK AT *THE PEASANT OF THE GARONNE*

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If one wished to sum-up Maritain's philosophy, one need go no further than the phrase 'To distinguish in order to unite'. The idea encapsulated in these words, viz., that knowledge is an integrated unity of diverse parts, has guided Maritain's philosophical career from his early book on Bergson to the book we are discussing today, *The Peasant of the Garonne*. In the view of many thinkers, Catholics especially, Maritain's insistence on the order of knowledge was an important element of a philosophical programme that sought to accommodate the discoveries of modern thought in science, art, and religion with the teachings of the Catholic Church. So the publication of *The Peasant of the Garonne* with its incisive criticism of post-conciliar Catholicism's adoption of modern modes of thought was seen by many reviewers as marking a departure from the "progressive" tenor of Maritain's previous thought. It is of course true that this book contains biting remarks on post-conciliar Catholicism, perhaps suggesting to some that a more appropriate title would have been "The Curmudgeon of the Garonne." However, to consider *The Peasant of the Garonne* as the product of a man in the process of renouncing his past philosophical work would be quite erroneous.

My contention in this essay is that Maritain's thinking in this late publication is continuous with the thinking revealed in his early publications, particularly *The Degrees of Knowledge*. Whether in the early or in the late works, the theme remains: To distinguish in order to unite. In establishing my thesis, I shall first examine the pivotal role of realism in

Maritain's metaphysics; second, I shall focus on his consideration of the forms of knowledge; third, I shall show how these forms of knowledge, in his metaphysics, are integrated to constitute true knowledge; and finally I shall discuss how modernity's rejection of the order of knowledge has yielded the various kinds of false knowledge which, according to Maritain, have metastasized throughout the community of Catholic believers.

(1)

At the centre of Maritain's interpretation of St. Thomas's epistemology is the claim that judgments purportedly about the world contain an implicit affirmation that there is indeed an external reality. This affirmation finds its expression in the so-called "principle of identity," which asserts that which is, is.<sup>1</sup> The principle of identity underlies knowledge in the sense that each act of knowledge is, first of all, neither about itself nor about the knower but about being. But as the proper object of the intellect, being is grasped or intuited not as it is given sensibly but rather as a concept, for "[w]hen the intellect disengages this conceptual object to consider it in itself, in the degree to which it is being, it perceives that it is not exhausted by the sensible realities in which it is first discovered."<sup>2</sup> Being thus becomes fully intelligible or transparent to the knower, with the result that the mind is brought into an immediate relation to reality. For Maritain, knowledge is fundamentally a relation between mind and being, neither of which can be separated from the other. To be sure, this relation exists prior to any awareness of its epistemological role. As Maritain pithily observes, "[t]he intellect lives realistically before it recognizes the name of realism."<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, once one reflects upon the relation of mind

and being, one notes that the truth of judgments about the world is underwritten by the principle of identity.

Truth for the Thomist is found in the conformity of thing and intellect [adequatio rei and intellectus].<sup>4</sup> "But as Maritain notes, the significance of this formula is the conformity "has nothing to do with any copy or material tracing."<sup>5</sup> In an important section of The Degrees of Knowledge, he suggests that modern philosophy has its origins in the distinction between thing and object.<sup>6</sup> The term 'object' in this instance refers to the 'formal object' or 'idea' which, in modern philosophy, is independent of the thing it putatively represents. For the moderns, the idea is a copy of reality. The mind perceives reality through the intermediary of such representative ideas. This representationalism is the source of philosophical movements that, as least superficially, are opposed to one another, viz., skepticism and idealism. The skeptic questions the connection between ideas and the world and then concludes that knowledge is not possible because ideas (qua copies) fail epistemically.<sup>7</sup> Maritain, on the other hand, asserts that representationalism is the source of idealism: if ideas cannot represent an external reality, reality must be mental.<sup>8</sup>

The Thomistic position Maritain espouses repudiates the notion that the formal object is a "copy" of reality. Quite the contrary, the thing, for the Thomist, "is given with and by the object, and indeed...it is absurd to wish to separate them."<sup>9</sup> In the act of knowledge, the thing's essence is present to the mind as an intentional species. The mind and the thing known are thus placed within the same epistemic order, the consequence being that the knower can have direct knowledge of reality. On a more fundamental level, however, we should not forget that judgments about extramental reality presuppose the principle of identity, what is, is. So the

intelligibility of these judgments has its foundation in the intelligibility of being. Nevertheless, judgments can participate in the intelligibility of being in different ways and in different degrees. The ways in which judgments participate provide the diverse forms of knowledge while the degrees of their participation order these forms of knowledge into an integrated unity.

(2)

In Maritain's view, the diversity of knowledge can be explained by taking a closer look at the epistemic role of the intentional species. This role is brought into focus by the distinction between instrumental and formal signs. Instrumental signs enable us to know other things but in themselves perform no epistemic role. So, for example, smoke is an instrumental sign of fire and the portrait is an instrumental sign of the person who sits for the portrait.<sup>10</sup> Maritain seems to suggest that context determines whether something is in fact an instrumental sign. In contradistinction, the formal sign "is one whose essence is to signify."<sup>11</sup> The very nature of a formal sign, as Maritain says, is to "relate the mind to something other than itself."<sup>12</sup> Through the formal sign, the object becomes intentionally present in the mind as *species expressa* or concept. For the Thomist, conceptual knowledge is the *terminus* of a process that commences with sensible apprehension of the received form or *species impressa*.<sup>13</sup> From these image the mind engenders the concept by which a thing is known. The concept itself thus serves as a formal sign of the thing known. However, the cognitive role of formal signs is not restricted to signifying things that exist independently of the knower. Rather their employment in Maritain's Thomistic epistemology is to signify not only the objects of conceptual knowledge but also those of nonconceptual knowledge.

Nonconceptual knowledge is most readily exemplified in "poetic intuition," which is a "knowledge through affective connaturality which essentially relates to the creativity of the spirit and tends to express itself in a work."<sup>14</sup> Maritain maintains that in this connatural knowledge, i.e., knowledge by experience or feeling, "it is the object created, the poem, the painting, the symphony, in its own existence as a world of its own, which plays the part played in ordinary knowledge by the concepts and judgments produced within the mind."<sup>15</sup> He goes on to suggest that in poetic intuition subjectivity reveals itself in the artwork, whether poem, painting, or sculpture. The objects, the products of connaturality between Self and thing, are, as it were, formal signs of the poet's or artist's subjectivity. It is indeed true that there is a difference between the poetic intuition of the poet and that of the painter. The domain of the former is "the ocean of Being in its absolute universality," while that of the latter is corporeal existence "through which alone the ocean of Being in its infinity comes to show through for him."<sup>16</sup> Thus in the plastic arts the artist immerses himself in nature so that he can disclose himself in visible things. In poetry, contrastingly, the poet's innermost self is revealed not in visible reality but in the "universe of Being."<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, Maritain insists on the nonconceptual nature of poetic intuition, whether it is manifested in the plastic arts or in poetry. He points out further that while in science the creative function of the mind is subordinated to its cognitive function, in poetic intuition, this situation is reversed, with free creativity assuming primacy.

Maritain expands upon the role of nonconceptual knowledge in his account of the Thomistic theory of supernatural grace. He notes, for instance, that reason is insufficient in these matters, since, by itself, it cannot elevate us to union with God. Divine grace remedies the inadequacy of our creaturehood by raising our nature to the divine nature, though, in doing

so, imparts a connatural knowledge of divine things. Thus in his discussion of mystical experience, Maritain writes that charity unites a person to God, establishing a relation of connaturality between creature and the Creator.<sup>18</sup> Although this relationship yields knowledge of the divine nature - knowledge that is disclosed in mystical experiences - it does not employ concepts as does scientific knowledge. But since the character of the mystic's union with God suggests that it is essentially nonconceptual, perhaps it is inappropriate to say that mystical experiences, provide knowledge. Maritain confronts this issue, noting that "we may say that infused love and the touches of connaturality here spoken of are not in themselves 'formal signs' or the pure in quo of intellection like the concept, but that under illumination of the Holy Ghost, they are able to play a part comparable to that of the formal sign."<sup>19</sup> So given that mystical experience, and indeed connaturality generally, may function cognitively as 'formal signs', it, like concepts and judgments, yields knowledge, albeit knowledge that may be properly characterized as nonconceptual.

How does *The Peasant of the Garonne* speak to the distinction between conceptual and nonconceptual knowledge? Remarking on faith and reason, for instance, Maritain claims that there is an essential distinction between the two - a distinction which parallels that between grace and nature.<sup>20</sup> With the Thomistic teaching that grace perfects nature in mind, he indicates that theology, an arena of reason, can address matters of faith, while faith, for its part, can illuminate theological inquiry. The suggestion is that theology and faith are complementary, and the result, as he notes, is a genuine "Christian philosophy."<sup>21</sup> Although it is a philosophy in the sense that "its work is the work of reason," it is better able than secular philosophy to carry out its tasks because the guidance of faith protects it against "the allurements and irrational

dreams to which, without assistance coming from a source superior to reason, [it] would be disposed to yield."<sup>22</sup> But we must be careful here. Maritain is not intimating that faith and reason exist in separate but compatible spheres. His point rather is to adopt St. Thomas's teaching, which is "to distinguish without ever separating."<sup>23</sup> In Christian philosophy faith and reason illuminate each other's domain. Indeed, this is generally true of the forms of knowledge, conceptual and nonconceptual alike. In *The Peasant of the Garonne* Maritain acknowledges this manner of distinguishing among the forms of knowledge, pointing out, however, that the distinctions it yields can only be preserved if knowledge is recognized as having an intrinsic order, that is, as having degrees.<sup>24</sup>

## (3)

The most complete statement of Maritain's position on the order of knowledge is found, of course, in his book *The degrees of Knowledge*, which contains an account of the three levels of abstraction or intelligibility - physical, mathematical, and metaphysical.<sup>25</sup> With respect to the first, Maritain asserts that we can have two forms of understanding, viz., that of the ontological order or philosophy of nature and that of the empiriological order or experimental science. Let us leave aside the controversies surrounding this claim and focus instead on the role the differences between these forms of understanding play in his overall philosophical programme. Maritain notes that they are complementary forms of knowledge in the sense that error occurs when emphasis is placed on one to the exclusion of the other.<sup>26</sup> The advancement of scientific knowledge occurs through the mutual interaction of these forms of understanding. Maritain then considers mathematics, the second level of intelligibility which abstracts

quantitative relations from the mobile bodies studied on the first level of abstraction. While these quantities are purified and reconstituted and thus serve as the basis for the construction of other such entities, no commitment is made to their actual existence.<sup>27</sup> In metaphysical abstraction, however, the mind passes "beyond the sensible without renouncing existence, and...thus introduces us into what is more real than sensible reality, or into that on which that very reality is founded."<sup>28</sup> So this third level of abstraction complements and perfects the other two in that it brings the mind to the very source of their intelligibility, viz., being itself.

For Maritain the knowledge of being is the source of all intelligibility. But this knowledge differs according to its object and hence possesses an "intrinsic order" which is governed by the principle of analogy. In metaphysical pursuits knowledge is present in the mind not univocally but polyvalently or analogously. But the multiplicity of metaphysical knowledge has an order determined by the causes of the different kinds of metaphysical knowledge. Thus proceeding from the lower to the higher cause, the properties of a sensible thing provide perinortic intellection, its essence dianoetic intellection, and supersensible reality ananoetic intellection.<sup>29</sup> Underwriting the degrees of metaphysical intelligibility, then, is the principle of analogy, a principle that enables being to be studied from the point of view of sensible reality, from that of essence, and finally as a sign of supersensible reality. In metaphysical knowledge being is understood according to the way it is presented in each of these analogues.<sup>30</sup>

Still, even the highest form of metaphysical knowledge, viz., ananoetic intellection, cannot yield direct knowledge of God, i.e., supernatural knowledge, since its mode of knowing is purely conceptual. In fact, theological knowledge, a higher form of knowledge than metaphysics as it incorporates concerns of faith, is likewise insufficient in this respect for it too

must rely on conceptual knowledge. To attain supernatural knowledge, a person must be recipient of sanctifying grace. Through the intervention of grace, and specifically mystical experience, a person acquires the formal signs that provide connatural knowledge of divine things. Maritain even suggests that this reality is accessible to poetic intuition.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, connatural knowledge does not annul conceptual knowledge. Rather, following the Thomistic programme, viz., that grace perfects nature, mystical experience perfects metaphysical and theological knowledge in manner analogous to the way in which ananoetic intellection "perfects" the lower forms of metaphysical intelligibility and to the way in which metaphysics "perfects" science and mathematics. The order of knowledge that results embodies genuine knowledge.

The failure to recognize genuine knowledge is the "sin against the intellect" of which our age is especially guilty. In *The Peasant of the Garonne* Maritain indicts modernity on precisely this charge. Its origin is to be found in the philosophy of Descartes, the "godfather" of modern philosophy. Because Cartesian subjectivism reduces all knowledge to the same plane of intelligibility, its epistemological basis is not the principle of analogy (as it was for St. Thomas) but the principle of univocity, which holds that all forms of knowledge have the same epistemic status. The consequence of adopting this principle, as Maritain suggests in *The Pleasant in the Garonne*, is that "[f]rom the start one mixes everything together."<sup>32</sup> The upshot is the unfortunate philosophical *melange* which confronts the observer of modernity - a *melange* in which "philosophy of nature, metaphysics, theology, natural mystique, even touches of supernatural mystique, all of which are made to contaminate and corrupt one another in a powerful high - soaring lyrical flight - unnatural and deceptive because it is pseudo-angelic."<sup>33</sup> From this conflation of the various forms of knowledge has issued what Maritain has termed

quite appositely "Fables and Intellectual False Currency."<sup>34</sup> Herein one finds the false knowledge which has ensconced itself in contemporary philosophy and indeed has invaded the sacred precincts of Catholic theology.

(4)

What precisely does Maritain mean by "Fables and Intellectual False Currency" and, more specifically, what are the forms false knowledge has assumed? Maritain notes that the need for such knowledge has deep roots in our culture. Although he is not explicit on this point, I suspect that he would say that a sort of residual Cartesianism is the source of this need. The Cartesian inspiration of modernity is twofold. First, its insistence on the role of mathematics in establishing epistemic certitude contributed importantly to the positivist belief that only the empirical sciences were capable of providing knowledge. This belief found its expression in "scientism" - the claim that the natural sciences are the paradigmatic form of knowledge. Second, Cartesian subjectivism occasioned the rise of idealism and its derivatives, the modern ideosophies which offer enlightenment through thought and thought alone. Ideosophy has a distinguished pedigree, having such outstanding representatives as Hegel, Comte, and Husserl. Let us then investigate these two strains of "Fables and Intellectual False Currency" and their manifestations in contemporary thought.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of modern culture is the prestige accorded the empirical sciences. The high status of science in today's intellectual life is not entirely unwarranted, for their advancement has furthered the material enrichment of mankind beyond the wildest dreams of previous generations. Unhappily, the most significant result of this

development has been an epistemological imperialism exercised on the part of empiriological science over the other domains of knowledge. For many contemporary thinkers, especially those in the positivist vein, the only legitimate forms of knowledge are those sanctioned by empiriological science. Scientific methodology is even applied to religion and the arts with the aim of showing that religious and aesthetic experience can be explained exclusively in terms of empiriological concepts. Many positivist thinkers are reacting to some extent against the metaphysicians of antiquity who extended "the functioning and the conceptual lexicon proper to the philosophy of nature...to the science of nature." The error of the modern positivist is just the converse, that is, "to believe that the kind of thinking and conceptual vocabulary proper to the science of nature can serve to build a philosophy of nature."<sup>35</sup> However, when scientism suppresses philosophy of nature and then invades the realms of art and religion, the consequence is always intellectual failure, for scientism is unable to do justice the forms of knowledge and the ways in which they complement and perfect each other.

Turning to ideosophy, Maritain maintains that it is an imposter posing as philosophy. The salvation it offers originates in a *gnosis* which repudiates belief in an independent reality. Scientism, whatever its faults, at least affirmed the existence of a mind-independent reality. For the philosopher, then, ideosophy's danger resides primarily in its claim that reality cannot be attained. The mind is then launched "on miraculous dreams or enthralling adventures in which its living forces will blaze in vain."<sup>36</sup> But for the Christian the most serious challenge ideosophy presents is its denial of Christianity's "incarnational" dimension. The arena of faith is the world of flesh-and-blood people and material things, not some mind-dependent philosophical construction. In the economy of salvation, "The Word became flesh and dwelt

among us."<sup>37</sup> Ideosophy, however, renounces the reality of the "flesh," and by doing so "refuses to recognize the intrinsic order of the human intelligence, with the essential distinction it requires between the typical forms of knowledge of which the mind is capable."<sup>38</sup> The indictment of contemporary theology that many discern in *The Peasant of the Garonne* discloses an acute sensitivity on Maritain's part to the important part ideosophy began to play in Catholic theology in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. For instance, in the theologies of Schillebeeckx and Küng, which incorporated much of the spirit of this period, one detects an attempt to re-interpret certain dogmatic realities as symbolic constructions of the mind. Contrary to the direction of ideosophical theology, Maritain emphasizes that a truly incarnational Christian theology must affirm the reality of the world in which salvation occurs.

Ironically enough, the most powerful salvos of *The Peasant of the Garonne* were reserved for a thinker who cannot be considered an ideosopher, viz., Pere Teilhard de Chardin. For the generation of Catholics that came to maturity in the 1960's, Pere Teilhard was more than just a distinguished Catholic paleontologist. He was rather the living embodiment of *aggiornamento*, Catholicism's opening to the world of modern thought. Maritain writes that Teilhard had a healthy sense of reality -- indeed Teilhard's thought is permeated by an incarnational view of the universe. Nevertheless, like many of his scientific contemporaries, Teilhard fell prey to the cardinal error of the modern era, the failure to make distinctions, for "the idea of a specific distinction between the different degrees of knowledge was always completely foreign to him."<sup>39</sup> In Teilhard writings poetic intuition masquerades as theology, with the result that the line between nonconceptual and conceptual knowledge is obliterated. What emerges is a sort of "theology-fiction."<sup>40</sup> How else is one to interpret the neologisms such as "noosphere" that

abound in the Teilhardian vocabulary than as the consequence of an effort to marry a profound poetic vision to an "up-to-date" scientifically based metaphysics? While Maritain, of course, has no objection to a metaphysics that takes into consideration to discoveries of modern science, he points out to the disciples of Teilhard that if the appropriate distinctions are not made the consequence will be the proliferation of a false knowledge that purports to answer the most fundamental questions of the human mind but which, in the end, leaves it entirely barren. This intellectual emptiness is what false knowledge has instilled into modern life.

Looking back then after almost twenty-five years after the publication of *The Peasant of the Garonne*, how are we today to respond to Maritain's critique of contemporary thought culture? Specifically, how are we to address the concerns he raises about post-conciliar Catholicism's apparent infatuation with the modern world? To begin with, we must recognize that the sciences have retained their prestige and indeed quantitative methods are widely applied in the human sciences. Moreover, in the social policies based upon these sciences, bureaucratic planning is the order of the day. But the rational organization of contemporary society has its antithesis in the diverse irrationalist creeds that have arisen over the past two decades. Many ordinary people no longer seek meaning from the traditional religious beliefs of their parents and grandparents; instead they turn to the *ersatz* salvation promised by fundamentalist sects. Some even turn to the New Age pseudo-philosophies - pseudo-philosophies which make the "theology-fiction" of Teilhard look positively sober in comparison. Religious thinkers, on the other hand, are increasingly drawn to theologies that derive their inspiration from the various ideosophies that flourish on the intellectual scene.

It would be disingenuous to say that these developments have not found their place within the Catholic Church. The bureaucratic imperative has its ecclesiastical adherents (witness the many commissions that have sprung-up in the post-conciliar era) while fundamentalism, the New Age, and ideosophy have a significant following within the Catholic laity. The ready acceptance of such false knowledge is really the result of modern Catholicism's failure to acknowledge the order of knowledge - a failure which, in the case of the Church, allows the realm of grace become submerged, as it were, in that of nature. The remedy for the intellectual crisis of contemporary Catholicism is the genuine knowledge of Christian philosophy. What will be required, that is, "is an uncanny sense of the requirements of that 'subtle and delicate' art which consists in *distinguishing in order to unite*." <sup>41</sup>

1. Maritain, Jacques, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. B. Wall and M. Adamson (New York: Charles Scribner's & Sons, 1938), p. 93.
2. *Ibid.* p. 84.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
4. *Ibid.* p. 106; See also *Summa Theologiae* I q. 16 a.2, Et propter hoc per conformitatem intellectus et rei veritas definitur.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.* pp. 110-122.
7. In his book *The Downfall of Cartesianism 1673-1712* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966) Richard Watson argues that Cartesianism failed because "the Cartesian could give no intelligible explanation of how ideas represent their objects. (p. 3) Watson's argument is that this failure occurred as the result of the skeptical objections posed by an obscure cleric named Simom Foucher.
8. Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, pp. 129-130.
9. *Ibid.* p. 113.
10. *Ibid.* pp. 144-145.
11. *Ibid.* p. 145.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.* pp. 145-154; See also Maritain, Jacques, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: Meridian Books, 1955), pp. 71-72.
14. Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, p. 86.
15. *Ibid.* p. 86.
16. *Ibid.* p. 94.
17. *Ibid.* p. 95.
18. Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, p. 321.
19. *Ibid.* p. 323.

20. Maritain, Jacques *The Peasant of the Garonne: An Old Layman Questions Himself about the Present Time* (Cuddihy, M. and Hughes E., trans.) (New York: Holdt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), p. 20.
21. *Ibid.* p. 142.
22. *Ibid.* p. 143.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.* p. 114.
25. Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge* p. 166.
26. *Ibid.* p. 248; p. 245.
27. *Ibid.* pp. 170-178; As Maritain states, mathematicians are constantly engaged in the construction of mathematical objects (*entia rationis*). It is the nature of these objects to have a conceptual existence only. Thus Cantor's transfinite numbers, imaginary numbers, etc. can be entertained as concepts without suggesting that they can exist in the real world.
28. Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, p. 258.
29. *Ibid.* pp. 248-278.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 262.
31. *Ibid.* p. 316.
32. Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne*, p. 115.
33. *Ibid.*
34. *Ibid.* p. 112.
35. *Ibid.* p. 141.
36. *Ibid.* p. 114.
37. *John* 1: 14.
38. Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne*, p. 115.
39. *Ibid.* p. 119.
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.* p. 140.