

# *THE INFINITE AND THE ETHICAL*

Richard Feist

## **I. Ethics, Metaphysics & Motivating the Soul**

When reading Jacques Maritain's classic, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, one cannot help but be struck by his arresting image of the kind of soul that does metaphysics.

Metaphysics demands a certain purification of the intellect; it also takes for granted a certain purification of the will and assumes that one has the courage to cling to things that have no use, to useless Truth.<sup>1</sup>

For Maritain 'useless' does not mean 'unimportant.' And it does not mean 'unhelpful' either. So, what does it mean? Maritain continues:

...nothing is more necessary to man than this uselessness. What we need is not truths that serve us but a truth we may serve. For that truth is the food of the spirit. And, by the better part of ourselves, we are spirit. (*ibid.*)

Truth as food for the soul – this is an old image; indeed, gathering knowledge, reading, intellectual activities as a whole have often been understood as a 'kind of eating.' We often speak of 'devouring' a book or 'consuming' an idea. Like food, truth is a necessity for survival. Unlike food, truth is something that we must serve, that is, it is that to which we owe an allegiance. Now, such a needed truth cannot be anything but a 'deep truth,' a reflection of the order of reality. It cannot be any kind of 'positivist' order, an order that we have merely imposed on experience. In Maritain's words:

Useless metaphysics puts order – not any sort of police order, but the order that has sprung from eternity – in the speculative and practical intellect. [Metaphysics] gives

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., Tr. G.B. Phelan, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959, p. 4.

back to man his balance and his motion, which, as is well known, means to gravitate, head first, to the midst of the stars, while he hangs from the earth by his two legs.

Now, the point here is a well-known one: according to Maritain, ethics demands the deep truths, it requires metaphysics. Maritain concludes:

Throughout the whole extent of being, metaphysics reveals to [humanity] authentic values and their hierarchy. It provides a centre for [humanity's] ethics.

One could say that proper, or 'useless' metaphysics is essential for ethics; and is essential in two ways. First, correctness – that is, metaphysics is essential for us to get our ethics right. Second, motivation – that is, metaphysics is essential for us to be motivated to be ethical. By this I do not mean that we lack ethical motivations. Aristotle famously declared that all men desire to know. Plato, at least for a while, held that no one willingly does evil. Maritain is following these thinkers in so far as saying that we have ethical motivations or inclinations. The satisfaction of these within the context of an ethical system, however, is not easy. Now the links between Maritain's own metaphysics and ethics are numerous, complicated and very much transcend the limits of this paper. Fortunately, Maritain himself, in a sense, provides what I take to be the Royal Road to understanding the relationship between metaphysics and ethics. One way to put it is just as we have seen in the quotations above. We are for the most part spirit and so our ethics must reflect that side of us.

Maritain's Royal Road occurs almost on the final page of the lengthy – 460 pages – *Moral Philosophy*. He says that we could try to ignore our spiritual side and all questions about metaphysics. Why not just look at the 'human condition' and do ethics based on that?<sup>2</sup>

I start from here with Maritain primarily since many philosophers would have problems both with all the Thomistic machinery involved in Maritain's thought and with being asked to start doing ethics by considering human beings as more than simply physical creatures. Admittedly, this approach tends to secularize Maritain's thought more than perhaps his followers would like, but at least it is in the spirit (no pun intended) of his thought: his concerns are more accessible and perhaps the rest of his work more amenable to a sympathetic reading.

Now, regarding the above question, Maritain offers two responses. The first is a logical analysis of the idea of 'the human condition' and the second is an empirical investigation of the attempts to begin ethics with the idea of the 'human condition.' In the first, Maritain tries to show that it is internally contradictory to hold such a moral disposition. I admit to not being terribly

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<sup>2</sup> Maritain, *Moral Philosophy, An Historical and Critical Survey of the Great Systems*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), pp. 455-6.

sympathetic here with Maritain and I state without argument that his logical analysis is question-begging.

To be fair to Maritain, he himself quickly moves to his second argument. A rapid shift of gears suggesting, but certainly not proving, that he was uncomfortable with his logical analysis. In any case, his second argument, the empirical analysis of the idea of building an ethics solely on the basis of the human condition, has the form of a negative proof. Maritain writes:

Supposing that it could be fully carried out, such an acceptance of the human condition would make man live on the edge of animality; it is, as we have noted, as impossible in reality as the refusal of the human condition, because to accept fully subjection to moral evil, in whatever manner one conceives it, is not possible for the human being.<sup>3</sup>

The view that human beings could live such that they act without concern, refrain from understanding their actions in a moral manner, is an idealization. Maritain calls this total acceptance of the human condition as “a limit to which, even in its most primitive representatives, our species has never attained.”<sup>4</sup> Historically, humans have proven to be curious creatures. According to Maritain, we are necessarily curious creatures. But, our curiosity has, so to speak, been expressed in different modes. When attempting to understand the non-human world, history has shown a general move away from any kind of anthropomorphic understanding. However, when we understand ourselves, we have always understood ourselves to be ethical interpreters of our behaviour; humans always ask themselves, at some time or another, ‘is behaviour X moral?’

Maritain is not claiming that humans have always and everywhere had ethical systems, or ethical theories. Rather, he is claiming that humans have always been inclined to see themselves as moral creatures. There is a primitive sense of knowledge here. For Maritain, science and philosophy know their objects via a conceptual construction.<sup>5</sup> Maritain holds that moral experience exemplifies a different kind of knowledge, what he calls ‘knowledge through connaturality.’ He writes that this is “a kind of knowledge which is produced in the intellect but not by virtue of conceptual connections or by way of demonstration.”<sup>6</sup>

So, the necessarily curious human creature cannot rest content with being a mere object in the world in the sense of only understanding its own behaviour in a descriptive manner. We are inherently normative creatures as well. Finally,

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<sup>3</sup> *Moral Philosophy*, p. 456.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Degrees of Knowledge*, p. 207.

<sup>6</sup> Maritain, *The Range of Reason*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1952, p. 22.

there is a mode of knowledge, connatural knowledge, that is based on our moral experience. Admittedly, this is a very primitive type of knowledge. For instance, it is that type of knowledge that one claims to have when one just ‘knows’ that genocide is wrong. We often say things like “I just know this; I can feel it in my bones.” Such knowledge cannot be reduced to some conceptual, ethical system; however, that does not mean that such primitive moral knowledge cannot be philosophically examined. Maritain insists that we must go on to philosophically examine such basic knowledge.

What would be grist to Maritain’s mill is that in contemporary epistemological debates, not even Quine was fully comfortable with abandoning the normative. He stressed that philosophy has to stop trying to set the standards of knowledge and yet he never quite said that we must stop asking ‘why or should people do as they do?’ and just ask ‘what do people in fact do?’

Of course, in the field of ethics, it is often said that ‘cultural relativism’ is perhaps one of the clearest instantiations of a naturalized epistemology, that is, an epistemology that abandons the normative. Certainly, a thinker like Maritain would have recoiled in horror at such a prospect.

But again, we have only seen the first step according to Maritain. That is, we cannot simply accept that we are inherently normative and do our moral philosophy within the confines of ‘humans are merely physical creatures with normative inclinations.’ This is not sufficient for us. It still leaves open the question, ‘why be moral?’ So, Maritain claims, there will have to be another step here. But this leads us on to metaphysics.

## **II. Metaphysics and Science**

The whole idea of metaphysics, as is well known, suffered rough treatment in the hands of various philosophers, especially the positivists, during the twentieth century. In the literature on the history and philosophy of science, there has been much discussion regarding the link between the rise of the two great scientific theories of the previous century, General Relativity and Quantum mechanics, and the development of logical positivism. Of course positivism itself originates prior to these theories and can, to a certain degree, be linked to the rise in nominalism in the late nineteenth century.

The development of nominalism had come, to a great degree, from the mathematicians of the Italian school of geometers. They insisted that mathematics, the foundational discipline for science, and basically all of knowledge, was not *about* anything. Let us consider two simple examples, negative numbers and geometry.

We all learned to extend the set of (natural) numbers 0,1,2,3 and so on to include negative numbers. We call the resulting set from negative to positive infinity the ‘integers.’ But how did we learn the negative numbers? We often used concrete examples, like temperatures above and below zero or as in money, when it is positive to have it and negative to owe it. A similar educational process holds for geometry; we learned its concepts by drawing pictures and saying that ‘that is a triangle.’

The mathematical nominalists insisted that these connections between mathematics and what is about are simply historical accidents. Geometrical concepts are no more necessarily about spatial figures than negative numbers are about debts.

The larger implication is that empirical science, like mathematics, should not be about the real things in the world, but simply about our experiences of the world.

As this general nominalism tended to feed into positivism, there were, of course, many reactions to it. So, within science, battles over nominalism and positivism were quite common. Some thought of it as the great emancipation of scientific thought from the old metaphysics of being whereas others held that it divorced science from reality and ultimately would be the death of the discipline.

In *The Degrees of Knowledge*, Maritain makes some very interesting remarks on physics.<sup>7</sup> He clearly was up to date on the developments in relativity theory *and*, more importantly, its interpretations. Now, what was in vogue at the time was to interpret relativity theory as lending strength to the positivist program. And this gift of strength to positivism reinforced, in turn, the positivist reading of the theory. Clearly circular, but, circular things can roll along quite nicely; and this one did, for some time.

Maritain, however, rejected the positivist approach to science. His rejection was not only of positivism’s scientism, that science was the only means of knowledge, but that science was merely a nominalistic mathematical framework imposed on reality, a reality forever unknown in itself and indeed, an absurdity when one even tries to know it in itself. We have already seen that Maritain calls this a ‘police order’ and distinguishes it from metaphysical order.

What I find quite fascinating is Maritain was able to read the absolutist picture underneath Einstein’s physics long before it become popular to do so. As I mentioned, Einstein’s physics was then read as being supportive of the positivist picture of science. But what we have come to learn now is that the term ‘relativity’ is misleading. What Maritain saw in 1922 is that Einstein did not do

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<sup>7</sup> *Degrees of Knowledge*, Chapter IV.

away with an objective framework to the universe *per se*; rather, he replaced the old objective framework with a new one. Simply put, Einstein abandoned the old Newtonian framework of space and time as distinct and objective features and replaced it with a single structure, space-time, which is, ultimately, as absolute as Newton's space and time.

But how did Maritain come to this reading of Einstein so early? He did attend Einstein's lectures at the Sorbonne and no doubt followed them in great detail, for they were popular expositions of relativity. But, in *Degrees of Knowledge*, Maritain discusses modern physics with the slant that one has if one has read scientists such as Eddington and Weyl. These thinkers, especially Weyl, come out of an anti-nominalist, anti-positivist understanding of science.

Maritain warns us in *Degrees of Knowledge*, that many philosophical errors in the past were based on a misunderstanding of science. And so he argues that the positivist view does not correspond to the way science really is and that his own philosophical approach does correspond to "the vast logical universe of whose modern development the sciences offer us some picture."<sup>8</sup> Maritain adds that he cannot offer a full-scale argument regarding this correspondence, for it would, he says, take an entire treatise to do that. Unfortunately, Maritain never wrote such a text. (At least as far as I know.)

Nonetheless, Maritain warns against building a philosophy on latest results of science. He calls this a 'dangerous liaison.' If philosophy marries science today, she is bound to be a widow tomorrow.

### **III. The Legacy of Positivism: The Wasteland**

Positivism, according to Maritain, abducted reason, turning it away from the contemplation of true order, the actual order of Being, and into some kind of petty officer, imposing order on human experience. But this is just the latest chapter in a rather long story according to Maritain. If we anthropocentrize reason, making it simply a tool for conceptualizing human experience, then Maritain argues, we encounter a huge loss. In his *Scholasticism and Politics*, Maritain writes:

Having given up God as to be self-sufficient, man has lost track of his soul. He looks in vain for himself; he turns the universe upside down trying to find himself; he finds masks, and behind the masks, death.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Degrees of Knowledge*, p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> Maritain, *Scholasticism and Politics*, Tr. M.J. Adler, Garden City NY: Doubleday, Image Books, 1960, p. 13.

But as I mentioned, this is all part of a long story. In his *The Range of Reason*, Maritain makes it clear that he thinks that our current time is indeed an ‘age in crisis.’ Maritain writes:

For the moment we are at the lowest point; human history today is in love with fear and absurdity, human reason with despair. The powers of illusion are spreading all over the world, throwing all compasses off direction...men are simply losing the sense of truth...they will believe nothing they are told, but will rely only upon savage experience and elementary instincts.<sup>10</sup>

As he puts it in *Scholasticism and Politics*, this secularization of reason, begun in the Enlightenment, did not result in the unassailable foundation of truth upon which we could ground all action. Instead, Maritain declares, we have the:

...progressive loss, in modern ideology, of all the certitudes coming either from metaphysical insight or from religious faith, which had given foundation and granted reality to the image of Man in the Christian system. The historic misfortune has been the failure of philosophic Reason...Human Reason lost its grasp of Being, and became available only for the mathematical reading of sensory phenomena.<sup>11</sup>

One may complain that this is an overly bleak representation. Also, this bleak picture was painted by Maritain not in our times, but some fifty years ago. Moreover, the ideas and concerns that Maritain would have factored into his assessment of the grave times we are in would have been formed prior to that. In sum, Maritain paints his picture when the positivist movement was in its heyday, a movement which arguably, has been quite dead for some thirty odd years.

This may be, but Maritain’s concerns and assessments have more contemporary reflections. For instance, in a book only about twenty years old, *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre says much the same things as Maritain regarding the malaise of our times. MacIntyre begins his book with the view that “...integral substance of morality has to a large degree been fragmented and then in part destroyed.” This destruction, he goes on to write, “marks a degeneration, a grave cultural loss.”<sup>12</sup>

And what is the result of all this, this loss of the integral substance of morality? MacIntyre does not really say. He simply ends his entire discussion by pointing to “the new dark ages which are already upon us.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *The Range of Reason*, pp. 116-117.

<sup>11</sup> *The Range of Reason*, p. 186.

<sup>12</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, p. 21.

<sup>13</sup> *After Virtue*, p. 245.

If there is one thing that we can pull out of this discussion it is this. As reason became ever more the articulator of human everyday experience, it lost sight of the true depths of Being and the true depths of human being as well. I would suggest that Maritain would agree with this considering his very negative reaction to phenomenology. Phenomenology, at least as Maritain understood it, was a philosophy that did concern itself solely with the given, rejecting any kind of traffic in metaphysics.

#### **IV. Metaphysics and Ethics in Dark Times**

So, if metaphysics provides a centre for ethics and that metaphysics can form a package deal with a properly understood science, what kind of ethics can Maritain offer for these dark times? I shall just consider what Maritain says about Plato and Aristotle and relate it what I had mentioned in section one of this paper, namely my take on Maritain's view as implying that we are necessarily normative creatures. My goal is to offer one way of understanding the idea of the infinite within the context of Maritain's ethics.

In his study of Plato's ethics, Maritain writes:

What I should like to note is that precisely because the End of human life is, for [Plato's] philosophy, transcendent and supra-human, it is very difficult to find a common measure between that End and the means which lead toward it, in other words to see how that End could be the measure of our acts as means leading toward it.<sup>14</sup>

Now consider a Socratic point of view, Maritain says, a non-transcendent or intra-human conception of the End, that the end is a happiness within our reach. If I am angry, it is straightforward to see why allowing my anger to vent itself will not lead to happiness since "we lose peace of soul, we call forth the resentment of others, we make a lot of enemies for ourselves. Anger, then, is not a virtue."

But suppose, now, that I am an angry Platonist. For Plato:

...happiness was the state of the soul which has arrived, here below and then beyond the tomb, at the contemplation of incorporeal reality and the separate Forms. Now I ask: why is patience with others a more suitable means than anger for arriving at that end? Suppose I do not know at first that anger is not good; suppose that the only way I can measure my acts is by their proportion to my ultimate End—what kind of relation can I perceive between the Subsistent Good, transcendent, absolute, ineffable, and my movement of anger or my act of patience? Could I not just as well think that in giving free reign to my anger I shall be co-operating with the effort of nature to expel stupidity and meanness from its bosom; that I shall be avoiding

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<sup>14</sup> *Moral Philosophy*, p. 25.

tension or repression and consequently be better preparing myself for union with the divine? I am without a guide and without a compass. The Absolute is too high to serve as a standard for measuring these poor things which are my acts. If the End is transcendent, if it transcends man and the human life, it transcends also the moral measurement and regulation of human acts.<sup>15</sup>

Plato has an infinite to guide us, but it is an infinite that is beyond our reach. This is the truly useless infinite.

On the other hand, if we bring ethics down to earth, humanizing it, we encounter another kind of problem, what Maritain calls ‘the paradox of Aristotelean ethics.’ He says that “There is no moral system more thoroughly and authentically humanistic. And there is no moral system more disappointing for man.”<sup>16</sup>

Maritain holds that basically all of Aristotle’s ethical principles are true. That is, happiness is the last *subjective end* of human life. But Aristotle made ethics too much of an immediate concern, even to the point of not completely capturing just what most deeply motivates us. Aristotle’s depth and appeal only works to part of us, although it does that extremely well. However, Aristotle’s ethics does not motivate us decisively. How come?

Because, Maritain says, this subjective end of human happiness blocked Aristotle’s thought from grasping that good which lies beyond happiness; a good that is loved more than happiness; a good that is the condition for the love of happiness. Aristotle missed this distinction between happiness and the supreme good. But in some sense the distinction still shone through: Maritain holds that Aristotle at least implicitly understood this distinction. Aristotle’s philosophy: left in shadow the supreme Good to which I and my happiness are ordered. From this moment the supreme End, remaining essentially human, also remains involved in human complexity. It is proportioned to man and commensurate with man, that is to say with the deception inherent in the human condition, the precariousness and the falsity of human goods. It is the sum and the summit of a collection of goods each of which is uncertain and menaced—a fragile and fleeting supreme End, deprived of all power of decisive attraction.

True as they are (but incomplete), the true principles of Aristotle’s moral philosophy do not penetrate the concrete existential reality of the human being. They are incapable of stirring his aspirations and his profoundest hopes, which go beyond rational and reasonable happiness, incapable of probing the recesses of his ego and the world of the irrational with its impulses toward death and the void. In a word, what is infinite in man has been forgotten.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Moral Philosophy*, p. 25.

<sup>16</sup> *Moral Philosophy*, p. 47.

<sup>17</sup> *Moral Philosophy*, p. 50.

One understanding of this internal, forgotten infinite, is that we are spirit, that we have some non-physical aspect to us.

This non-physical aspect, according to Maritain, would be that imprint of God within us. Now, to many, this idea of an internal infinite or imprint of God is highly questionable. But again, Maritain's point, as I read him, is that if we do not accept it, our ethics remain unsatisfactory. Another way to point this is the following. If we do not make humans into some kind of reflection or image of God or at least something that has an existence that is deeper and more valuable to 'material existence,' then why be moral at all?

What Maritain is getting at is that ethics lacks a true foundation unless we bring the spiritual. On this topic I wish to bring in a rather unlikely supporter: Richard Rorty. Perhaps I should say an *indirect* supporter of Maritain's view. Rorty holds that all humans are free, equal and have certain rights that must be respected. But, if we ask Rorty, "how do we know all this?" Or, "Why should we respect or value persons?" Rorty candidly admits that these are ungrounded beliefs. In effect, he admits that the secular framework was ultimately written up by "freeloading atheists."<sup>18</sup> In other words, a totally humanistic ethics appropriates the Judeo-Christian tradition's conclusions about the dignity or sanctity of the person while denying the Judeo-Christian tradition's premises that led to those conclusions.

Now, if this all goes through and we do start to see ourselves in terms of having a spiritual side or an infinite side, what would be the practical ramifications? How would this infinite guide us in our practical ethics?

The infinite does not, so to speak, lay before us like a vast volume of predetermined responses to various ethical problems. Instead, the infinite is, to use Kantian parlance, the condition of the possibility of our being ethical creatures. This property, 'being an ethical creature,' is best thought of as a complex. First, the infinite, being within, serves to pull or to motivate us, to provide an answer to the question, 'why be moral?' This answer of course is not a rational argument, but something highly personal. Second, the infinite enables one to adopt various perspectives on the world, to see it from the perspective of other beings. This ability permits us to see the value that other beings possess. The particular ethical judgments that we make are going to be inescapably particular. They may vary with the situations themselves. One could say that the internal infinite is radically existentialized in the particularity of choice. In

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<sup>18</sup> Richard Rorty, "Postmodern Bourgeois Liberalism," *The Journal of Philosophy* 80, (1983): 538–89.

making moral decisions, Maritain holds, one “must embody and grasp the universal in his own singular existence, where [one] is alone face to face with God.”<sup>19</sup>

So I think that the infinite is to be thought of as a motivator for ethical behaviour. And one might say that if Maritain has provided us with some real motivation for being ethical, then he has done more for practical ethics than any listing of predetermined responses could ever do.

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<sup>19</sup> Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*. New York: Vintage Books, 1966, p. 59.