

BOOK REVIEWS

Distinguish to unite or, The degrees of knowledge, by Jacques Maritain; presented by Ralph McInerny; translated from the fourth French edition under the supervision of Gerald B. Phelan. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995.) xxviii, 500 p.; 24 cm. (*The Collected Works of Jacques Maritain*; volume 7). Hard Cover (ISBN 0-268-00876-0) \$34.95; Paperback (ISBN 0-268-00886-8) \$25.00.

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It is difficult to review a book that is, in many respects, a classic. Though not Maritain's best known work—that designation would fall to one of his many volumes on social and political philosophy, natural law and human rights—*Distinguer pour unir: ou, les degrés du savoir* is certainly one of his philosophically most important. It went through eight editions, from 1932 until 1958 and, in addition to English, it has been translated into Spanish, Italian, German and (in part) into Dutch and Polish.

Best known by its second title, *The Degrees of Knowledge—les degrés du savoir*—was published when its author was already 50 years old, and it shows the maturity of Maritain's thought—reflecting his lengthy study of science and epistemology, and being the fruit of some 20 years devoted to the study of St Thomas. It came at a time that saw the publication of a number of other important epistemological studies, such as Karl Popper's *Logik der Forschung* [*Logic of Scientific Discovery*] (1934), Alfred Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936), and Edmund Husserl's *Formale und transzendente Logik* (1929), and it is perhaps the best example of 'Thomistic' epistemology of the twentieth century.

Reviewed by figures such as Walter Ong, M.D. Roland-Gosselin and C.E.M. Joad, *Les degrés du savoir* is likely one of the few major Thomist texts to have been discussed in *The New Statesman and Nation* (in 1938). Its influence in the Anglo-American philosophical community was, however, not widespread, and largely limited to Catholic colleges and universities. Still, this did not

significantly lessen its impact, given that there are twice as many people who have French, Spanish or Italian as their mother tongue as have English.

Admittedly, *The Degrees of Knowledge* bears the mark of its time. Maritain employs a 'schematic' model of identifying and categorising options and of making distinctions—something that is not quite popular today. It is also a book written at a period when neither being 'an easy read' nor jargon-ridden obscurantism were yet considered principal virtues. But it is far from turgid, and it shows Maritain's philosophical style at its height.

The general theme and structure of the work does not need repeating here, but it is worth indicating some of the reasons why it continues to merit rereading—or reading for the first time.

The Degrees of Knowledge provides something of a lesson in how to engage in 'scholastic' or Thomistic philosophy. This work—like so many of Maritain's writings (as Gerald McCool and Leslie Armour have pointed out)—reflects one of the aims of Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni patris* (1879), namely, 'to reintegrate scholastic thought into contemporary culture.' It serves as an example of how to work within a philosophical tradition, without being closed to new insights that allow that tradition to be extended.

A second important feature of this book is that it provides an epistemology that not only allows a place for, but explains the compatibility of, rational argument, mystical experience and religious faith. Such an epistemology is particularly important at a time when 'fideists,' 'Reformed epistemologists,' and 'postmodern constructivists' hold that at the very least one must be suspicious of attempts to discuss or demonstrate faith and mystical experience. Maritain shows that a number of problems in understanding metaphysical (and 'higher') knowledge are due to the failure to distinguish different kinds of knowledge—though, in making these distinctions, one need not and should not think that there are different 'knowledges.' (Hence Maritain's title, 'distinguish to unite.') And so, he can move from a discussion of knowledge in philosophy and experimental science in Part I of *The Degrees of Knowledge* to the degrees of supra-rational knowledge—including both Augustinian 'theological wisdom' and the contemplative mysticism of St John of the Cross—in Part II. Maritain also argues that knowledge of 'higher' things is fundamentally dependent on the use of analogy—a point that is well worth reflecting on, though it has not been acknowledged in contemporary epistemology.

Third—and perhaps most significantly—*The Degrees of Knowledge* remains interesting and valuable because it deals with a theme that is characteristic of, but antedates, much of postmodern thought—i.e., the critique of 'modern epistemology.'

One of the principal challenges made by postmodern thinkers concerns the possibility of philosophical proof or demonstration. To take a familiar case, in his famous *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, 1979), Richard

Rorty argues that epistemology since Kant—which Rorty takes to be roughly co-extensive with epistemology as a whole—takes knowledge as being a ‘mirror’ of reality, and that this approach is fundamentally defective. It is interesting that, in many respects, Maritain would agree with such a critique and, in *The Degrees of Knowledge*, in response to ‘modern epistemology’ and its various versions of a ‘copy theory’ of knowledge, he develops an alternative—the theory of ‘critical realism.’

But not only does Maritain’s work challenge ‘modern’ epistemology, but it also calls into question what Maritain would have seen as the radical subjectivism of postmodern epistemology. Maritain would point out that both modernism and postmodernism (mistakenly) presuppose a ‘reductionist’ approach to knowledge—that there is exactly one way of knowing and one way of establishing something to be true. Thus, in *The Degrees of Knowledge*, Maritain argues that there are different types of intellectual activity and method, that correspond to different objects of investigation or knowledge. One must, as it were, pursue both a metaphysical and an epistemological enquiry at the same time. In doing so, one can avoid the over-simplification of rational method typical of modernity and, at the same time, have an alternative to postmodernism. Whether Maritain is ultimately successful in articulating a viable epistemology is another matter, but it is worth noting that he provides a means by which the cognitive character and truth of metaphysical statements can be preserved—particularly against the kinds of objections raised by Popper, Ayer and Husserl.

The republication of *The Degrees of Knowledge* serves to continue to make this text—one of the key works that marked the renewal of Thomism in the early decades of the 20th century—available at relatively modest cost. But the present work is also the first of some twenty volumes in the newly-projected *Collected Works of Jacques Maritain* in English, published under auspices of the Jacques Maritain Center at the University of Notre Dame in the United States.

The undertaking of such a venture may seem unusual. But Maritain spent many of the most philosophically productive years of his life in North America, and much of his work was published in English or almost immediately in English translation. These *Collected Works* will contain the best translations of Maritain’s works, with some older translations revised where necessary, and some new translations commissioned. Moreover, Maritain’s work as a whole continues to be relevant, not just in epistemology, but in classical metaphysics, aesthetics, ethics, and political philosophy. Many of his more popular writings are still reprinted, the *Oeuvres complètes de Jacques et Raïssa Maritain* (15 vols., Fribourg (Switzerland): Éditions universitaires, 1982-) is now complete, and Maritain continues to be mentioned favourably in papal encyclicals, most recently in *Fides et ratio* (1998).

This edition of *The Degrees of Knowledge* uses the second, elegant and definitive, English translation prepared under the direction of Fr. Gerald B.

Phelan, based on the eighth French edition of 1958. It is not, however, just a reprinting—though the translation is the same, there are a few corrections and the pagination is slightly different. This new edition is easy to use, but has narrower margins than the 1959 edition published by Scribner's and (in the United Kingdom) by Bles.

The selection of *The Degrees of Knowledge* as the first published volume in the *Collected Works* helps to signal the importance and value of the series as a whole. While some may think it awkward to have started publication with 'Volume 7,' this is no doubt intended to provide an added incentive for individuals and libraries to acquire the entire collection. One hopes that the remaining volumes of these *Works* will not be too long 'in press,' so that students and scholars alike will be able to enjoy the benefits of the complete edition.