



Transcending depersonalization in contemporary science

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I start this paper on “Transcending Depersonalism in Contemporary Science” by making reference to Jacques Maritain’s 1947 Mexico City address to UNESCO in which Maritain called for the Organization effectively to use education, science, and culture to contribute to international security and concrete work for peace among peoples.²

Maritain’s address touched on solving five interrelated and historically-rooted problems that he considered necessary conditions to building a supranational community of peoples and the future work of peace: (1) absolute national sovereignty; (2) *Machiavellianism*; (3) *Realpolitik*; (4) transcending the Babelism of modern thought; and (5) reconciling wisdom and science, especially in modern technology.³

At the time, Maritain claimed that modern nation states absurdly presumed the right of absolute sovereignty trumps all other moral authority while, simultaneously, appealing to the contradictory doctrine of natural law to justify whatever they chose to do.⁴

Maritain called the claim that politics should be indifferent to a real good and evil “a homicidal error” and such appeals to natural law intellectually incoherent.

He added that only the right spiritual, the right moral and metaphysical, climate, one capable of affirming the existence of real heroes, can produce that power of authentic political justice that can conquer the principle and power of Machiavellianism. He maintained that we will never achieve a stable and enduring peace in this world so long as, in the structures of civilization and human awareness, we maintain Babelism in human thought (the divorce between wisdom and science that modern “philosophy’s” father, René Descartes, initiated) and we fail to start rigorously submitting the applications of science to moral right and the true ends of human life.⁵

As Maritain saw it, to transcend the depersonalization in contemporary science UNESCO needed to help the world recover a correct understanding of the human person and cultural

¹ Ponencia en el Congreso Internacional “¿Una Sociedad Depersonalizada? Propuestas Educativas”, de la Universitat Abat Oliba CEU (Barcelona, 13-15 de abril de 2010).

² J. Maritain (1974). “Allocution du Président à la première séance plénière de la deuxième session de la Conférence générale de l’Unesco, 6 novembre 1947, Son Excellence Jacques Maritain, Chef de la Délégation française” in (1982). *Célébration du centenaire de la naissance de Jacques Maritain, 1882–1973*. New York : UNESCO, 9–33.

³ *Ibidem.*, 16 – 18.

⁴ *Ibidem.*, 11.

⁵ *Ibidem.*



truths from our classical ethical, metaphysical, and religious wisdom that support it, into physical science.⁶

Maritain reasoned that, given the contemporary world's widely differing theological and metaphysical traditions, on a practical level, appeal to the existence of a natural law would be the best way for peoples of the world today to come to some sort of common agreement about what we are as people, what is wisdom, and how we should go about reintegrating these notions into physical science. If a natural law truly exists, he reasoned, it would depend upon a common understanding of the human person, and we should reasonably expect to find evidence of its existence and the notion of the dignity of the person that supports it historically in the world body of common law.⁷

While Maritain was engaging in such musings his French friend and philosophical colleague Étienne Gilson was musing about how some Westerners tend to be slow learners, have needed some time to grasp the full implications of the postmodern project. At the close of World War II, Gilson claimed we in the West made our most astounding, involuntary, discovery: modern and postmodern science are essentially Nietzschean. "The great secret that science has just wrested from matter," Gilson observed, "is the secret of its destruction. To know today is synonymous with to destroy."

Gilson considered Nietzsche's declaration of God's death to be "the capital discovery of modern times," bigger than the explosion at Hiroshima. While Maritain was musing about how to use recognition of natural law to form common practical agreements among the world's people, Gilson thought that Nietzsche's declaration of God's death signaled a metaphysical revolution of the highest, widest, and deepest order in the West. Nietzsche is metaphysical dynamite. He knew it, readily admitted it.⁸

While Enlightened Westerners had gotten out of the habit of talking about things like "divine law," some, like Maritain, apparently still held onto its vestige in Enlightened, secularized appeals to "the voice of conscience" to solve the world's problems. But what will happen to us, Gilson asked, when more of us start to realize that the postmodern voice of conscience (and, presumably, its principle: natural law) is the reflection of nothing, a convenient illusion we have created to maintain the intoxicating joy of our own poetic and sophistic project?⁹

Finding ourselves totally free to engage in the perpetual, Sisyphean task of endless self-creation, Gilson said, we resemble a soldier on a twenty-four hour leave with nothing to do: totally bored in the tragic loneliness of an idle freedom we cannot productively use.¹⁰

To Gilson's ears, the explosion of Hiroshima resounded a solemn metaphysical assertion of postmodern man's statement that, while we no longer want to be God's image, we can still be God's caricature. While we cannot create anything, we now possess the intoxicating power to destroy everything. As a result, feeling totally empty and alone, postmodern man offers, to anyone willing to take it, the futile freedom he does not know how to use. "He is

⁶ *Ibidem.*, 13.

⁷ *Ibidem.*, 14 – 17.

⁸ E. Gilson (1949). *The Terrors of the Year 2000*, Toronto: St. Michael's College, 5 and 14 – 16. See F. Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, in F. Nietzsche, *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*, no editor or translator listed (1954). New York: Random House, Modern Library, 923 – 933.

⁹ E. Gilson (1949). *The Terrors of the Year 2000*, 28.

¹⁰ *Ibidem.*, 24.



ready for all the dictators, leaders of these human herds who follow them as guides and who are all finally conducted by them to the same place—the abattoir” (the slaughterhouse).¹¹ Having freed ourselves from divine rule, the necessary political consequence for postmodern man is political enslavement by a totalitarian State. Having refused to serve God, we have no one left to judge the State, no arbiter between us and the State.¹²

As Gilson saw it, just after World War II, appeals to conscience helped some of us in the West, apparently Maritain included, to pretend not to understand the catastrophic consequences for the West and the world of the grandiose sophistry of the postmodern project: Our destiny has become “the absurd” and “truly exhausting task” of perpetual self-invention without model, purpose, or rule. Having turned ourselves into gods, Gilson maintained, we do not know what to do with our divinity.¹³

Clearly, for Gilson, just as for Maritain, the terrors of the postmodern world are, in root cause, metaphysical; but, for him, the chief clash of civilizations we face today is not between the politics of West and East, or the West and other political orders, between the Western tradition and other metaphysical and religious traditions. It is a metaphysical clash between the ancient and modern West.

Gilson maintained that, from time immemorial, we in the West have based our cultural creed and scientific inspiration upon the conviction that gods, or a God, existed. All of our Western intellectual and cultural institutions have presupposed the existence of a God or gods. No longer. All of a sudden, God no longer exists. Worse, He never existed! For Gilson, the implication was clear: “We shall have to change completely our every thought, word and deed. The entire human order totters on its base.”

If our entire cultural history depended upon the unswerving conviction that God exists, “the totality of the future must needs depend on the contrary certitude, that God does not exist.” The metaphysical terror now becomes evident in its depths. Nietzsche’s message is a metaphysical bomb more powerful than the atomic weapon dropped on Hiroshima: “Everything that was true from the beginning of the human race will suddenly become false.”

Moreover, mankind alone must create for itself a new self-definition, which will become human destiny, the human project: *To destroy*. Gilson tells us Nietzsche knows that, as long as we believe that what is dead is alive, we can never use our creative liberty. Nietzsche knows and readily admits his mission is to destroy.¹⁴

If Nietzsche speaks the truth about his project, which Gilson thinks he does, Gilson maintains the he is announcing the dawn of a new age in which the aim of postmodern culture, its metaphysical project, is to make war upon, to overthrow, traditional truths and values. To build our brave new world order, we have to overthrow the metaphysical foundations of Western culture. “Before stating what will be true, we will have to say that everything by which man has thus far lived, everything by which he still lives, is deception and trickery.” As Nietzsche says, “He who would be a creator, both in good and evil, must first of all know how to destroy and to wreck values.”

¹¹ *Ibidem.*, 28 – 29.

¹² *Ibidem.*, 28.

¹³ *Ibidem.*, 21 – 25, 28 – 29.

¹⁴ *Ibidem.*, 16 – 17.



In fact, Gilson maintains, our traditional Western values are intentionally being wrecked all around us, everywhere, under our feet. He says he stopped counting “the unheard of theories thrown at us under names as various as their methods of thought, each the harbinger of a new truth which promises to create shortly, joyously busy preparing the brave new world of tomorrow by first of all annihilating the world of today.”¹⁵

What, then, are we who oppose Nietzsche’s project to do in the face of such a cataclysm? Nietzsche’s plan, his mission, is to destroy “today to create tomorrow.” Gilson considers forgivable that we should not have anticipated Nietzsche’s advent. “But,” he says, “that we should not understand what he is doing while he is doing it right under our eyes, just as we were told he would do it—that bears witness to a stranger blindness. Can it really be that the herd of human being that is led to the slaughter has eyes and yet does not see?” Gilson’s explanation for such a depth of blindness is that the announcement of a catastrophe of such an order usually leaves us “but a single escape: to disbelieve it and, in order not to believe, to refuse to understand.”¹⁶

Whether Gilson thought Maritain suffered from such blindness, I do not know. I think he did. And, at the very least, Gilson clearly appears to be saying that, if a natural law truly exists, looking today to international law for evidence of its existence and the notion of the dignity of the person that supports it historically in order to overcome contemporary Babelism cannot work. The chief reason that the postmodern world is essentially hostile to such notions, is rooted in a moral, metaphysical, and political rejection of the first extrinsic principle of natural law: the existence of a creator God.

Instead of presuming a common agreement about the existence of a natural law upon which to build a common consensus about human nature, Maritain would have been better off facing the reality of the world around him, in recognizing that the postmodern project is essentially rooted in a rejection of natures, or forms, in things and that Babelism in modern thought cannot be overcome unless and until, like an alcoholic incapable of self-recovery, postmodernity first hits bottom and accepts a common understanding that forms exist in mind-independent realities. If postmodernism is built upon a rejection of the existence of forms in things, upon which the classical understanding of natural law depends, how can we make appeals to that law give us the common understanding of the human person that will allow for communication between substances?

We need to recall that the postmodern project that gave birth to Nietzsche has its essential roots in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s attempt to solve Descartes’s failed attempt to explain this communication between the substances of mind, or spirit, and matter. To resolve this problem, Rousseau had rejected Descartes’s contention that God had given us this system simultaneously whole in a multitude of clear and distinct ideas buried in our mind. Instead, Rousseau maintained that no such system of clear and distinct ideas exists within the human spirit. Instead, under the influence of the “voice of conscience,” or “tolerance,” through progressive self-development (what we, today, call “progress”), Rousseau maintained that God has intended obscure human emotions to emerge from the human race into a scientific system of clear and distinct ideas.¹⁷ Only after this final stage of

¹⁵ *Ibidem.*, 17 – 18.

¹⁶ *Ibidem.*, 17.

¹⁷ P. A. Redpath (1998). *Masquerade of the Dream Walkers: Prophetic Theology from the Cartesians to Hegel*. Amsterdam and Atlanta: Editions Rodopi, B.V., 72 – 73. See, also, J.J. Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, Allan Bloom (1979). New York: Basic Books Inc., Publishers, 285 – 287.



scientific knowing could human beings be really free and could real communication between substances come to be.

Rousseau contended that conscience is a way of speaking: an oracle, or voice, that moves us to project our emotions in increasingly unselfish ways across three stages of development: from a child of mechanical instinct, to being a moral agent, to becoming a fully social civic being. For Rousseau, knowledge, science, true communication between substances, are simply the long-term result of projected emotion, of an increasingly socialistic will to power. As he saw it, the voice of conscience is God's voice, free speech, an act of increasing states of tolerance or compassion whereby human nature emotionally emerges, or evolves, beyond a more primitive mechanical system of selfish individualism to an imperfectly social and moral stage, to, finally, a perfectly political social system of true science.

Rousseau realized that conscience in the proper sense cannot exist prior to the existence of knowledge and reason, the civic stage of complete Enlightenment. Where no truth exists, strictly speaking, no real conscience, freedom, or human communication exists. Like Descartes, Rousseau conflated truth and science and, like Descartes and Nietzsche, he located truth in an act of strong will, or emotion. For him, prior to the existence of real human science, no human truth exists. Hence, before humanity reaches its final stage of total social inclusion, a kind of totalitarian or collectivist civil will, scientific Enlightenment, Rousseau held that what we call "conscience" is a primitive, mechanical-like groping toward the human good and no true freedom exists.

Only the Enlightened system of ideas (global socialism) can make conscience emerge. Because non-Enlightened ideas (1) are obscure and indistinct feelings and (2) cannot produce audible sound; they can produce no real communication, no real free speech. Rousseau maintained that such ideas generate the counterfeit noise of fanatics. Hence, prior to the new Enlightenment political world order, conscience and true freedom had no voice, no real free speech or human communication, existed; strictly speaking human beings were not scientific, not free, and no true, or social, justice could exist.

For our purposes, we need to understand that the metaphysical principles that underlie the contemporary Western understanding of science and its development are not philosophical. They are sophistic understandings of human nature, conscience, and natural law; chiefly ideological, propagandistic, principles derived from Rousseau's sophistic, utopian dream of human nature, science, and happiness.

Moreover, we need to understand that our contemporary Western educational institutions and the socialist political regimes that give birth to and support these institutions are necessary effects of the application to the practical order of Enlightenment sophistry about the nature of philosophy and science, of the political attempt to reduce the whole of knowledge to a science of clear and distinct ideas..

In short, mainly under the influence of Descartes's and Rousseau's disordered understandings of science, the Enlightenment project unwittingly gave birth to educational institutions that are institutes of sophistry, essentially socialistic forms of propaganda and secularized fundamentalism. These arose as the necessary means for engendering a poetic, metaphysical myth that the whole of science is contained in modern physics, which only the mathematical physicist can read.

Under the influence of Descartes, Rousseau, and their progeny, modern physical science sought to be intellectually all-consuming, to be the only form of human learning, of human truth. No rational argument can justify this quest. So, the modern scientific spirit turned to



poetic myth, sophistry, and fundamentalistic spirituality to create the metaphysical arguments it needed rationally to justify its all-consuming nature. In practical terms, this means that, if universities are primarily institutes of higher education, and metaphysics is the highest form of natural human education, the modern scientific spirit necessarily inclined Western intellectuals to create propaganda institutes, and political regimes that support the existence of such institutes, to justify modern science's claim that it is the only form of human knowledge.

Most critics today correctly call these neo-gnostic, fundamentalistic, principles "secular humanism." They wrongly call them "philosophy." Educationally, under the influence of Rousseau, these sophistic principles maintain that all learning is revelation, or disclosure, of the something that replaces the traditional Western creator-God, of something they call the "human spirit." By "human spirit" they mean a universal scientific spirit (the spirit of progress, of true human freedom, of the human project) that grows by first revealing itself in forms of backward Scriptural writings and organized religious practices: the same sort of universal, anti-Catholic, anti-Semitic spirit that was a main cause of the development of Fascism, Nazism, and Marxism.

For their adherents, metaphysics is the epic poetic story, an Enlightened fairy tale, about the evolution, or emergence, of human consciousness, the universal human spirit, from backward states of selfishness and primitive religions like Judaism and Catholicism to that of a new political world order dominated by Enlightened systematic science and the religion of love of humanity. And tolerance is this mythical history's chief engine of progress, story-telling, and means of reading history.

The means of such emergence consists of a synthesis of what Rousseau calls the "voice of conscience" (which he conflates with natural law) and poetic enthusiasm, or, more simply, "tolerance," an increasingly inclusive socialist feeling for love of humanity, an increasing willingness to incorporate all human differences into a higher state of socialist political consciousness as a means for achieving the political goal of world socialism: for everyone to think the same way Enlightened intellectuals think.

Traditional Western universities, classical liberal arts, the classical understanding of philosophy, natural law, individual liberty, the dignity of the individual human being, and republican government are unsuitable handmaidens for generating, growing, and sustaining these myths. Hence, the approach that Maritain took to overcome the Babelism of modern thought is unworkable. Instead, we need something radically different: an approach that insists on the existence of forms in physical things, including that of a soul within the human person and an educational philosophy rooted in human beings possessing human faculties that become maturely developed through human habituation.

A necessary condition for the start of such a recovery program is that, like the utopian addicts we are, Westerners must bottom out and recognize that postmodernism is essentially out of touch with reality, that we cannot build, or recover, a culture based upon the conviction that no real communication exists between substances. As our friend and colleague John N. Deely rightly tells us in his most recent monograph, *Semiotic Animal: A Postmodern Definition of 'Human Being' transcending Patriarchy and Feminism*, "Just as in politics you cannot effect a revolution and at the same time preserve the *ancien régime*, so in intellectual culture you cannot develop what is new simply by repeating what is old."¹⁸

¹⁸ J. N. Deely (2010). *Semiotic Animal: A Postmodern Definition of 'Human Being' Transcending Patriarchy and Feminism*. South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 10.



If we want to transcend depersonalization in contemporary science, we have to transcend the Babelism of modern thought that is essentially related to the denial of the existence of individually existing human beings naturally capable of communicating with each other independently of social science and the socialist state. To be able to do this, we cannot simply return to the classical notion of natural law, or even to the classical understanding of the human person as a “rational animal.” Modernity and postmodernity have largely twisted these ideas beyond recognition, divorced them from connection with the reality in which we live our daily lives.

As Maritain recognized, to reunite wisdom and science, we need a new understanding of the human person. The reality of our situation, however, is that, during our time, the only contemporary student of St. Thomas who has attempted to develop such an understanding and expand it beyond the ghetto of contemporary Thomism is John Deely. Hence, whether we agree with him or not, Deely is a man whose thinking we cannot ignore. For, as Umberto Eco has recognized, Deely is the person through whom the “knowledge of the Thomistic tradition has largely been expanded beyond the confines of the Catholic world.”¹⁹ Deely is the modern Commentator of Thomism to the secular world.

Such being the case, someone has to keep Deely honest, insure that, in conceiving of human beings as semiotic animals, he restores the existence of forms to mind-independent beings and soul, a faculty psychology, and habits to the human person. And who else is there better to do this today than members of the International Étienne Gilson Society?

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¹⁹ P. Cobley (2009) (ed.), *Realism for the 21st Century: A John Deely Reader*. Scranton: University of Scranton Press, back cover.