

MARITAIN AS AN INTERPRETER OF AQUINAS ON THE PROBLEM OF INDIVIDUATION

I

The medieval problem of individuation is not the contemporary problem of «individuals» or «particulars»¹ discussed by P. F. Strawson, J. W. Meiland and others¹. In a certain sense the problem of individuation originates with Parmenides, but it is Plato's philosophy of science which bequeaths the problem to Aristotle and to his medieval commentators. Its solution in Aquinas is not that of Aristotle, nor is it that of Scotus or Suárez. Aquinas will distinguish between the problem of individuation and what we may call the problem of «individuality» or the problem of «subsistence». The solution to both will draw upon many Aristotelian distinctions but will incorporate key elements of St. Thomas' own metaphysics, including the real distinction between essence and existence and his doctrine of participation.

It is Maritain's appropriation of St. Thomas' metaphysics which enables him to produce a realistic philosophy of science, one which he offers as compatible with contemporary scientific enquiry. It also enables him to develop a theory of person and personality. But the story begins with Plato.

Although Plato's theory of knowledge may appear fanciful to the modern reader, his analysis of scientific knowledge contains a basic set of observations whose truth remains uncontested even though his explanation be faulty. Plato saw clearly that science is of the universal. Things may be particular, but when we consider them as objects of enquiry, the intellect focuses upon the form taken as an exemplar. In Plato's explanation things belong to their various kinds by participating in incorporeal, eternal and unchangeable archetypes. From a realist's vantage point the problem may be stated simply: since things are singular, how is it that we intellectually apprehend them as universal. Aristotle's solution is well known and it is one adopted and amplified by St. Thomas. Universals are abstracted from singular things.

No one would present Maritain as a medievalist, but, as an interpreter of Aquinas, he has wielded considerable influence in the United States and in Latin America. Many have come to St. Thomas under his tutelage. His knowledge of Aquinas is extensive and is drawn upon throughout his lifelong work, but perhaps nowhere more than in his philosophy of science and in his discussions of the person. The

¹ Cf. P. F. STRAWSON, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (London: Methuen & Co., 1959); J. W. MEILAND, *Talking About Particulars* (N.Y.: Humanities Press, 1970); P. BUTCHVAROV, *Ressemblance and Identity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966).

primary text for Thomas' doctrine of individuation is his commentary on Boethius' *De Trinitate*, where he discusses the division and methods of the sciences. Maritain's philosophy is indebted mainly to his reading of Thomistic texts, but he draws heavily, as well, on the works of his contemporaries Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange and Louis-B. Geiger, and on those of the classic commentators on Thomas, Cajetan, Sylvester of Ferrara and John of St. Thomas.

Though employing St. Thomas, Maritain is always a man of the twentieth century. In books, such as the *Degrees of Knowledge, Science and Wisdom, Existence and the Existent* and *A Preface to Metaphysics*, his foe is always some contemporary exponent of a nominalist position². «Nominalists», he will say, «have a taste for the real, but no sense of being»³. Timeless metaphysics, he will lament, no longer suits the modern intellect. «Three centuries of empirico-mathematics have so warped the intellect that it is no longer interested in anything but the invention of apparatus to capture phenomena»⁴. An overstatement to be sure, but indicative of the thrust of Maritain's metaphysical project: to engender a respect for the stable, enduring, timeless aspects of things.

II

My aim in this presentation is first to set forth the Thomistic doctrine and then to speak to Maritain's appropriation of it to show that Thomas is alive in the 20th century. Within the philosophy of St. Thomas, it is first necessary to distinguish between the problem of «individuation» and the problem of «individuality», although Thomas himself does not use the latter term⁵. Both are aspects of what may be called «the problem of multiplicity and plurality». The distinction of one thing from another is the problem of «individuality» or «subsistence». Membership in the same class is the problem of «individuation». Metaphysical analysis forces us to recognize both. Whereas being is directly attained in a highly individualized manner through judgment, it is conceptualized in the widest of its universal aspects.

² *Les degrés du savoir* (1932), trans., 4th ed., G. B. Phelan (N.Y.: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959); *Science et sagesse* (1935), trans. B. Wall (N.Y.: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940); *Court traité de l'existence et de l'existant* (1947), trans. L. Galantière and G. B. Phelan (N.Y.: Pantheon Books, 1945); *Sept leçons sur l'être et les premiers principes de la raison spéculative* (1934), trans. B. Wall (N.Y.: Sheed and Ward, 1939).

³ *Degrees of Knowledge*, p. 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ For a discussion of the diverse terminology employed in addressing the problem from the middle ages to the present, see JORGE J. E. GRACIA, *Introduction to the Problem of Individuation in the Middle Ages* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1984). Other works of interest include GRACIA, *Individuality: An Essay on the Foundations of Metaphysics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); GRACIA (ED.), *Individuation and Identity in Early Modern Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994) and GRACIA (ED.), *Individuation in Scholasticism and the Later Middle Ages* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

As agents reflecting on nature, we are confronted not only with a multitude of individual beings but with a multitude of beings within a class. Philosophically, how are we to explain numerical differentiation? How, on the other hand, are we to explain the existence of beings which share with each other a distinctive character? Or put another way: from a philosophical point of view, how is the evident individuality of a being maintained at the same time its sameness with others in a class is said to have a foundation in reality. It is axiomatic that where there is similarity we must look for difference, lest similarity becomes identity.

Indeed, Plato recognized the problem. To the question how can there be many individuals in a class, each member sharing a limited perfection of the class, his doctrine of forms and his notion of participation supplied the answer. Aristotle's analysis of cognition, his doctrine of abstraction and his distinction between potency and act provided him with materials for a different answer. For Aristotle, the groupings are not subjective but have a basis in reality. The intellect can consider all members of a class under a single concept because of the process of abstraction in which differences are left aside. Each member of a class has in common with other members of its class a nature, or essence, different from that had in common by the members of other classes. The groupings are not invented by the intellect but are discovered in antecedent reality. Given that analysis, how is sameness between beings which have their own unique reality to be explained?

For Thomas, the context is not simply the Aristotelian one, or even the one he encounters in commenting on Boethius' *De Trinitate*. Thomas' full explanation will incorporate his doctrine of the real distinction between essence and existence and his notion of participation. Considering the texts of Aquinas, the first aspect of the problem of the one and the many is the multiplication of beings: how can there be more than one being?⁶ His distinction between essence and existence, between *what the being is* and *the act whereby it is*, is crucial. There can be more than one being because the *act of to be* can be limited in a multiplicity of ways. In finite beings essence places a limitation on the act of to be. But individuality is a concept that pertains not only to material natures but to the divine and to angelic natures as well. It is existence that makes one thing distinct from another. «...two features belong to the notion of an individual, namely, that it is actually existent, either in itself or in something else; and that it be divided from other things that are or can be in the same species, existing undivided in itself»⁷. Those two features, existence-as-a-unit and division from all other things remain the basic features of Thomas' treatment of individuality. Everything has unity and individuation in accord with its having existence. «Each being», says St. Thomas, «possesses its act of existing and its individuation in accordance with the same factor»⁸. But existence cannot give rise to diversity. Plurality requires the recognition of composition. Every being other than subsistent being is necessarily composite, involving its own limitation. Individuality is

⁶ *Summ. theol.* I q. 29 a. 4.

⁷ *In IV Sent.* dist. 12 q. 1 a. 1 ad 3um.

⁸ *De anima* a. 1 ad 2um.

brought about by something that functions only in a potential not in an actual manner.

In purely spiritual, but nevertheless finite creatures, form is the sole essential cause of the individuality of a substance. Each distinctive form, or essence, places a different limitation on its act of to be. Thus Thomas can say that each angel is a species unto itself. With material substances, however, we have individuals, each with its own act of to be, but having a sameness because its nature places on it a same limitation of the act of to be.

To the question, «How can there (in the case of material substances) be many similar individuals in a class, each member showing a limited perfection of the class?», Thomas answers that the difference must be caused by something distinctive of matter itself. If each individual is regarded as participating in the perfection possible to its class, the principle of limitation cannot be found in the form, or principle of actuality, which makes the composite thing to be what it is, but only in the potential essence or prime matter. Without such a limiting principle the essence could not be multiplied. Considered abstractly, there is nothing in the concept of «essence» as such which requires multiplication. Conceivably, as with angels, an essence could be a species unto itself. The principle of actuality in the essence, that which makes the thing to be what it is, is the form. For a form to be multiplied, it must be limited. In fact, there is no individual being of our experience which exhausts all the conceivable perfections of its class. Whatever is later to be said about the role of «signate matter», primary matter for Thomas is the first intrinsic potential principle of limitation in the essence of material things. It must be noted that Aristotle's hylomorphic doctrine becomes in the hands of Thomas a metaphysical doctrine and not merely one to explain change.

For Thomas, the problem of individuation is not simply one of how an individual is recognized, i. e., by shape, size, color or activity. Beings, rather, are intrinsically different within their own class. Quantity, on this account, exercises an auxiliary role. On this interpretation, the principle of individuation by which each being is distinct from every other member of its class or species is a physical intrinsic constitutive principle in the individual essence. Whereas Aristotle identifies the individual essence with unchangeable form, Thomas places in material essences themselves an intrinsic principle of limitation, namely, primary matter.

The positions taken by Cajetan, Sylvester of Ferrara and John of St. Thomas constitute alternative interpretations of Aquinas and are responsible for discussions that extend over centuries. Maritain, although indebted to Cajetan in many respects, is closer to Sylvester than to Cajetan in his understanding of the role of «signate matter». Quantity for Thomas is understood as a proper accident inhering in the material substance whereby the substance has parts outside of parts in space, that is, has extension. Matter under determinate dimensions, «signate matter», as a proper accident, flows from the essence necessarily. It may be called an «absolute» or necessary accident. Essentially divisible, quantity is the basis of numerical designation. It makes a material substance fully individuated in a class or species. Yet it should be remembered that, on Thomistic principles, what is primarily individuated is neither

the matter nor the form but the received act of to be. Thomas' distinction between the principles of essence and existence, principles related to each other as potency is to act, is thus the foundation of his doctrine of individuation.

Thomas' theory of being is consistent with his theory of knowledge. Whereas Scotus will say, «That which is first known by the intellect is the individual being»⁹, Thomas insists that the intellect does not immediately and directly know the individual as individual but, rather, knows it indirectly and reflectively by a turning back to the image. The Thomistic universal is produced by abstraction, not as Scotus would have it by a process of precision or cutting off (*abscissus*) of differences. The Scotistic theory of individuation is consistent with Scotus' theory of knowledge, but that is another story.

III

Maritain incorporates these doctrines in a well developed theory of being and knowledge. They play a central role in his philosophy of science, which remains essentially that of St. Thomas but is updated to take account of modern achievements. He draws upon Thomas' theory of abstraction, his doctrine of causality, his theory of explanation and, of course, his solution to the problem of individuation.

Maritain takes as his starting point the manner in which the object of natural science is attained. To use his own language, when the mind's eye falls upon the flux of the sensible, it must immediately turn from it to the intelligible, the immutable, which is able to be extracted by the mind from the things of sensory experience. It is only in the mind that the universal enjoys the positive unity proper to it¹⁰. Yet the intelligible object as resident in external things and in the senses is a concrete singular. The intelligible instead of being transcendent to things is there immanent in them. The object of science is not an *ens rationis* but the *natures* of material things. The senses reveal ontological diversity and report a multiplicity of happenings in a changing world. The intellect, discerning commonality, moves from an experience of the singular to affirmations about the class. It is those observations, formulated as patterns or laws of nature, which stand in need of explanation. The movement from particular to universal leaves difference behind. It is a characteristic of science, in general, not simply modern mathematical science, to do away with individuation. There can be no *science* of the particular and yet the particular cannot be understood without the conceptual schema science brings to it.

«It is absolutely necessary to distinguish the *thing* with which science is concerned... and the perfectly precise object, («the formal object») upon which it lays hold and from which it derives its stability»¹¹. Anyone beginning in this manner will soon have to confront the problem of individuation. If one begins as a nominalist, one

⁹ *De anima* IV, c. 3, n. 15.

¹⁰ *Degrees of Knowledge*, p. 22ff.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

has an entirely different sort of problem, most likely, in contemporary parlance, «the reidentification of particulars». Maritain's starting point is obviously Plato's. «Science», he writes, «bears directly and of itself upon the abstract, on ideal constancies and super momentary determinations —let us say, on the intelligible objects that the mind seeks out in the real and sets free from it. They are there, they exist there, but not at all in the conditions of abstraction and universality that they have in the mind»¹². Human nature is realized concretely in each of us, but only in the mind is it realized as a universal nature common to all men. The laws of nature described by the natural science are possible because they concern natures or essences. Take, for example, the law of expansion of solids by heat. The law means that a solid has within it the secrets of its nature, a certain structure which necessarily and unfailingly determines it to expand according to specific coefficients under the action heat¹³. Heat may be described as kinetic energy and further described in a statistical law governing molecular motion, but behind this statistical law there is a nature which is undergoing modification. Movement is of its very nature a physical and not a mathematical thing. Nominalism of necessity is limited to the sense report and leads to mechanism as a philosophy of science. «If the universal does not directly or indirectly designate an essence, but only a collection of individual cases, it is not at all possible to understand how scientific law can be necessary and the succession of singular events contingent»¹⁴. The mind can consider intelligible objects abstracted from, and purified of, matter but only to the extent that matter is the basis of diversity amongst individuals within a species, i. e., insofar as matter is a principle of individuation¹⁵.

Basic to Maritain's understanding of the problem of individuality is Thomas' distinction between essence and existence, between the whatness of the thing and the act of *to be* whereby it is. This is seen in Maritain's analysis of the so-called «existential judgment». «In one simultaneous awakening of the intellect and the judgment the intellect affirms the existence of «something», i. e., «this thing exists»¹⁶. «In forming this judgment the intellect, on the one hand, knows the subject as singular (indirectly and by reflection upon phantasms) and on the other hand, affirms that this singular subject exercises the act of existence»¹⁷. It thus reaches the *actus essendi* (in judging) —as it reaches essence (in conceiving)— by meditation on sensorial perception.

With respect to self-knowledge the intellect only secondarily, by an explicit reflection upon its own act, becomes conscious of itself as thinking subject. The intellect is ordered primarily to being. From the very beginning, in the act of knowing it knows explicitly as extra-mental, the being and the existence of its object¹⁸.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁶ *Existence and the Existent*, p. 27.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

IV

Maritain's discussion of person is found in a slim but important work, *The Person and Common Good*. There he draws heavily on St. Thomas, making a distinction between «individuality» and the «person». Both concepts, «individuality» and «person» may be predicated of God, angels and men. The divine essence in its sovereign unity and simplicity is supremely individual. Angels are individuated essences. In the human composite, individuality flows from the material component. «Matter itself is a kind of non-being, a mere potency or ability to receive forms and undergo substantial mutations. ...In every being made of matter, this pure potency bears the impress of a metaphysical energy—the «form» or soul—which constitutes with it a substantial unit and determines this unit to be that which it is»¹⁹. Matter is characterized as an «avidity» for being; it derives all of its determination from form. «By the fact that it is ordained to inform matter, the form finds itself particularized in such and such a being which shares the same specific nature with other beings equally immersed in spatiality»²⁰. In order to exist, any being must be undivided and distinct from every other existent. In pure spirits individuality derives from the form constituting them as such and giving them their degree of intelligibility. Corporeal beings by contrast are individuated because of matter with its designated quantity. «Their specific form and their essence are not individuated by means of their own entity, but by reason of their transcendental relation to matter understood as implying position in space»²¹. As a material entity, man has only a precarious unity, a unity easily shattered into a multiplicity, for in itself matter is inclined to disintegration²².

The doctrine of participation is invoked, at the same time as the precariousness of human existence is stressed. «As an individual each of us is a fragment of a species, a part of a universe, a unique point in the web of cosmic, ethical, historical forces and influences—and bound by laws. Each of us is subject to the determinism of the physical world»²³. Nonetheless, each of us is a person. Personality signifies interiority, spirituality, and is traceable to the immaterial form. One and the same reality is in one sense an individual and in another sense a person²⁴. Our whole being is individual by reason of that in us which derives from matter and is a person by reason of that which derives from spirit.

In another text, speaking of the composite, Maritain writes, «We cannot conceive the notion of body without the notion of organism, of *caro et ossa*, and we cannot conceive the notion of organism without the notion of qualitative heterogeneity; and we cannot conceive the notion of qualitative heterogeneity without that of the properties perceived by the senses»²⁵.

¹⁹ *La personne et le bien commun*, trans. J. J. Fitzgerald as *Person and the Common Good* (London: G. Bles, 1948), p. 26.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

²⁵ *Science and Wisdom*, pp. 57-58.

In this text Maritain is arguing that we must respect the sense report of material reality. Because the sensory properties flow from the essence of the material nature, the senses themselves disclose far more than they are formally able to appreciate. The form or principle of intelligibility is grasped intellectually in the sense report. Respect for simple sense awareness is suppressed in purely physico-mathematical reports dependent on instruments of observation and measurement which methodologically fail to attain the intelligible whole. The universe of abstract quantity, Maritain will say, filters out nature²⁶.

Maritain earlier in his *Degrees of Knowledge* laid the groundwork for this analysis of the concept of «person». In that work he uses the word «subsistence» rather than «individuality» in making distinctions. «The first metaphysical root of personality is what is called subsistence. Subsistence presupposes a (substantial) nature that is individual or singular»²⁷. This nature (person) from the fact that it is endowed with subsistence cannot communicate with any other substantial nature in the very act of existence. It is, so to speak, absolutely enclosed with regard to existence²⁸. «Subsistence is for the nature an ontological seal, as it were, of its unity. When this nature is complete (a separated soul is not a person) and above all when it is capable of possessing itself, of taking itself in hand by the intellect and will, in short, when it belongs to the spiritual order, then the subsistence of such a nature is called personality»²⁹. Man must win his personality as he wins his liberty. A person develops personality within a community and runs the risk of contamination thereby. «For the same man who is a person... is also an individual in a species and dust before the wind»³⁰. Predicated of man, the word «personality» implies the laborious and the limited, the indigent and the complicated. Yet it designates man in the fullness of his human condition.

From considerations of human personality it is possible to free the notion «personality» from material limitation and predicate it not only of man, but of angels and of God as well. Of angels, Maritain writes, «Think of what an angelic person must be. Such a one is still a created subject, but each exhausts by himself alone a whole specific essence. Finite in relation to God, he is infinite in relation to us. He subsists immutably above time, a mirror of God and of the universe»³¹. And of God, he writes, «In reality, as soon as one leaves images behind in order to think of Divine Transcendence, it is clear that it demands personality absolutely and necessarily. Personality is the seal of that transcendence»³². «In Pure Act there is absolute unity, absolute integrity of nature, absolute individuality. Thus, Maritain finds that the notion of «individuality» is one that is predicated analogously. One seeks in Maritain's work, *Philosophy of Nature*, an analogous predication of the concept «individuat-

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

²⁷ *Degrees of Knowledge*, p. 231.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 234.

ion», as it might be said of the organic and inorganic, but he does not broach the topic³³.

V

Although Maritain never engages in what we today call «textual study», from beginning to end he is through and through St. Thomas. He doesn't simply appropriate St. Thomas, he makes the Angelic Doctor's philosophy his own. It is a philosophy used to achieve wisdom within the context of the Faith, but used extensively in Maritain's never ending war on what he takes to be erroneous views of nature and cognition, views which would deprive us of a metaphysics which opens one to the transcendent. From *Antimoderne* to *Le paysan* Maritain's philosophy is of a single piece. In the abstract his enemies are primarily nominalism, rationalism, positivism, mechanism and mathematicism. He is to be found correcting Descartes, Kant, Eddington, Russell, Meyerson, Husserl and scores of contemporaries. He not only draws heavily on the classic commentators of St. Thomas and authors previously mentioned, but he has read Báñez, Gredt, Hoenen, Chenu, Gardeil, Blondel and Maréchal, among others, sometimes respectfully disagreeing with their interpretation of Aquinas. Gilson and Garrigou-Lagrange may be considered his foremost tutors.

Maritain's Thomism is never without textual foundation, but it is a Thomism that speaks with a 20th century accent. In drawing upon St. Thomas' doctrine of «subsistence» and «individuation» Maritain is faithful to the texts, but he employs those notions in a way which Thomas himself never envisaged. This is characteristic of the whole of Maritain's work. It doesn't advance textual study, but it does further the development of a Thomism relevant to the matters we have been discussing.

With respect to these key doctrines, it is obvious that one has to interpret St. Thomas in the context of his *Opera Omnia*. There are no essay length, let alone book length, studies to be found in Aquinas on the problem of individuation. Maritain's interpretation of St. Thomas is certainly a valid reading and supported in studies by Joseph Owens, Armand Mauer and Charles A. Hart, to name but a few³⁴.

We began with Plato and must end there. The problem of individuation in the sense in which we have been studying it does not arise in most contemporary philosophy. The problem occurs only when a philosopher maintains that there are individuals with natures or essences common to other members of the species. Individuality has to be explained in the presence of commonness.

³³ *La philosophie de la nature*, trans. I. Byrne (N. Y.: The Philosophical Library, 1951).

³⁴ CH. OWENS, «Thomas Aquinas», in *Individuation in Scholasticism*, op. cit., pp 173; also «Judgment and Truth in Aquinas»: *Mediaeval Studies* 32 (1970) 138-158; MAURER, Introduction, *The Division and Methods of the Sciences* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1963), pp. IX-XL; HART, *Thomistic Metaphysics* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1959).

My reading of contemporary philosophical literature, particularly that of the last decade, suggests that the philosophy of science has taken a realist turn. Various forms of empiricism have failed to account for the success of inference in modern physics and biochemistry, as that which in one generation was postulated as a plausible mechanism for observed phenomena has become directly or indirectly visible in another. Realistic interpretations of natural science confront the philosopher with the same problems which begged Aristotle's analysis and Thomas' development thereof. Maritain in confronting the inadequacy of much 20th century empiricism was in many respect prescient; he has a much to teach *ad mentem Divi Thomae*. Through him Aquinas becomes very much a contemporary philosopher.

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