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# Intellectual Intuition in the General Metaphysics of Jacques Maritain

A Study in the History of the Methodology  
of Classical Metaphysics



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# Introduction

## *1. Jacques Maritain as a philosopher*

The philosophical thought of Jacques Maritain spans nearly all areas of philosophy from metaphysics and cognitive theory to political philosophy and the philosophy of history. As a philosopher, Maritain is one of the greatest Christian thinkers and Thomists of the XX century. Born on November 18th, 1882, to a religiously indifferent, lay, radical and anticlerical Protestant family, he discovered the truth of Catholicism under the influence of Léon Bloy, and together with his wife Raissa turned to the service of Truth and Gospel. In 1908, led by his spiritual guide O. Clérissac, Maritain discovered philosophy, and within it, critical realism based on faith in human reason as capable of an objective knowledge of reality. The philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, positing order in the world and sense in history, became to Maritain an illumination.

Maritain saw the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas as the summit of Christian thought. When its contemporary condition came under assault and the postulate of updating Thomist philosophy was put forward, while there appeared on the part of its advocates concrete attempts to bring the said philosophy up to date, namely by appealing to the empirical and formal exact sciences as well as various philosophical systems, he not only recognized the need to join in realizing this idea, but became one of the authors of a new, updated conception which may be described as re-examination of Thomist philosophy in its extant form as against the ideas contained in Aquinas' original philosophical texts.

Conscious of the special character of realist classical philosophy in its presentation by Thomas Aquinas, Maritain decided – together with a group of Thomist philosophers – to examine the extant variety of Thomism in order to determine its authenticity with respect to Aquinas' original thought. Having come to realize that they were dealing with a form of Thomism inconsistent with the original, whose authenticity had over the centuries been lost in certain significant respects, they focused their examination on the technical, methodological and historical aspects of Thomism<sup>1</sup>. In the course of further study with his fellow group Maritain demonstrated that the thought of Aquinas had indeed been altered with regard to two of its basic structural tenets, vitally important to the nature of Aquinas' philosophy. It was discovered that the original thought of this medieval thinker had been characterized by a wholly different conception of its own subject matter and had applied a wholly different method. The significance of these discoveries is made clear by the fact that the

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1 These figures were described in the book *Odkrycie egzystencjalnej wersji metafizyki klasycznej*, Warsaw 2004.

newly-discovered philosophy of Aquinas was termed the “existential interpretation” in opposition to its extant essential interpretation. According to this new interpretation, the task of classical philosophy was to study the real, however not in its essential, but rather in its existential aspect, in other words to describe reality from the standpoint of properties belonging to it on account of its existence.

As a philosopher, Maritain was an advocate of Thomism, i.e. the philosophy constructed on the foundations of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, which is why he joined in the process of its revival begun at the end of the XIX and the beginning of the XX century. By his rediscovery of Aquinas he made a significant and unrivaled contribution to the modernization of this philosophical current. Re-establishing the basis of realist classical philosophy, he considered this basis to be a metaphysics based on the common sense “intuition of being”. As a proponent of critical realism, he opposed Hegelian and post-Hegelian idealism as well as various forms of positivist rationalism characterized by agnosticism and materialism. Yet Maritain was far from dogmatic. Sensitive to values contributed by other philosophical systems, he considered Thomism – as exemplified in the authentic philosophical thought of Aquinas – a key which opens rather than a key which closes. We find in Maritain’s philosophy an openness towards existential and phenomenological thought. It is worth observing that his discovery invalidated many of the basic charges brought against Thomism by its contemporary critics.

## *2. Jacques Maritain's philosophical work*

As already stated, Jacques Maritain devoted himself to the study of problems in various areas of philosophy, as may be seen in the abundant philosophic (in the broad sense of the term) writings he bequeathed to posterity. The following three areas may be distinguished within the body of these works: theoretical philosophy, practical philosophy and theology. The first includes publications addressing topics such as the philosophy of being, theodicy, the theory of knowledge, the philosophy of nature, the philosophy of history, the methodology of science and traditional logic. The second focuses on questions relevant to the philosophy of culture, literature (especially poetry), ethics, sociology, political economy, education, Catholic social ethics and anthropology. Among the theological problems addressed by Maritain a special mention should be made of problems of moral theology, asceticism and religion. This abundance and diversity of subject matter is also proportional to the number of Maritain’s published works. By 1959, over 364 publications had appeared, many of them re-printed and translated into several foreign languages.

In giving an overview of Maritain's philosophic writings I shall limit myself to those concerning theoretical philosophy.

Maritain's work in theoretical philosophy contains a polemic with the principal philosophical currents of the XIX as well as the first half of the XX century philosophy, manifesting a general trend towards scepticism and epistemic agnosticism. These tendencies – as we know – were associated with the reduction of all reality to numerically measurable extended phenomena as well as the belief that this reality was the sole object of scientific knowledge. A distinguishing feature of this intellectual approach was the removal of classical philosophy from the body of scientific endeavour. This phenomenon became one of the most striking features of the intellectual climate of the day, and at the same time one of the greatest dangers to classical philosophy and to the culture built upon it. These, in short, are the circumstances which accompanied Maritain's formulation of his views in theoretical philosophy. His aim was to promote a broader understanding of the term "reality", to demonstrate that it was not reducible to numerically measurable sense data and to indicate the type of cognition by which it could be rationally apprehended.

In this way Maritain polemicized with the philosophical current represented by Positivism and Neo-Positivism with its roots in the extreme empiricism of the XVII, XVIII and XIX centuries. In this area of his writings he also argued against the then-fashionable idea of embarking on the practice of philosophy from scratch, held by philosophers such as F. Bacon, R. Descartes and E. Kant, or even in a certain sense E. Husserl. Hence the focus of Maritain's theoretical philosophy was on questions pertaining to the nature of the fundamental philosophical disciplines, the way in which their concepts are constructed, in other words – broadly speaking – questions of epistemology and method. A special place in Maritain's writings in theoretical philosophy is occupied by works devoted to ontology and the theory of knowledge. The latter category should also be seen to include problems belonging to the theory of science. Maritain discusses questions in ontology, epistemology and the theory of science in works such as: *Antimoderne*, Paris 1922; *Réflexion sur l'intelligence*, Paris 1924; *Réflexion sur l'intelligence et sur sa vie propre*, Paris 1932; *Le songe de Descartes*, Paris 1932; *Sept leçons sur l'être*, Paris 1932-1933; *Distinguer pour unir ou les degrés du savoir*, Paris 1932; *Science et sagesse*, Paris 1935; *La philosophie de la nature*, Paris 1935; *Quatre essais sur l'esprit dans sa condition charnelle*, Paris 1939; *La philosophie bergsonienne*, Paris 1914; *De Bergson à Thomas d'Aquin*, Paris 1944; *Court traité de l'existence et de l'existant*, Paris 1947; *Raison et raisons*, Paris 1947; *Éléments de philosophie*, vol. I and II, Paris 1946; *Trois réformateurs: Luther, Descartes, Rousseau*, Paris 1947; *Approches de Dieu*, Paris 1953 (cited are the first editions

of these works). The cited works are a selection from Maritain's thirty seven monographic publications.

The extent of Maritain's contribution to the renewal of realist classical philosophy built on Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas can be inferred not just from the quantity of his works, but also from the number of external commentaries addressing the problems of theoretical philosophy taken up by Maritain in the body of his writings. The philosophical literature devoted to Maritain's thought in ontology and the theory of knowledge includes both systematic and comparative works. I have termed them thus here because most of the time these works present either an account of Maritain's systematic solutions or compare them to solutions proposed by other practitioners of traditional philosophy, or even offer a comparison of both as per their conformity with the intellectual climate of the day. Maritain's metaphysical conceptions are also abundantly confronted with other areas of knowledge.

Systematic analyses of Maritain's philosophical solutions include several treatises, most of which deal with areas such as: philosophy of nature, philosophy of being, the theory of knowledge and the theory of science. With regard to philosophy of nature, special mention should be made of works by K. Kłósak, including: *Filozofia przyrody w ujęciu Jakuba Maritaina*, Polski Przegląd Tomistyczny, I(1939), pp. 154-70; *Konflikt nowożytnej fizyki teoretycznej a perypatetyczna filozofia przyrody w ujęciu Jakuba Maritaina*, Przegląd Powszechny, 227(1949), pp. 24-39; *Maritainowe próby wyodrębnienia filozofii przyrody od metafizyki i innych naukprzyrodniczych*, Roczniki Filozoficzne, XII(1964)3, pp. 17-30; *Stosunek filozofii przyrody do metafizyki w ujęciu współczesnych neoscholastyków*, Roczniki Filozoficzne, XIII(1965)3, pp. 5-30; noteworthy works written abroad include: N.M. Loss, *Filozofia naturale e scienze empiriche nel pensiero di Giacomo Maritain*, Salesianum, XII(1950), pp. 96-125; L.M. Regis, *La philosophie de la nature*, Philosophie, 1936, pp. 127-156.

Problems at the juncture of the philosophy of being and the theory of knowledge have been addressed in: J. Reiter, *Intuition und Transcendenz*, München 1967; M. Elizabeth, *Two Contemporary Philosophers and the Concept of Being*, The Modern Schoolman, 23(1948), pp. 224-37. In Poland, M.A. Krapiec and K. Kłósak have touched exclusively on themes related to metaphysics. This group of works also includes L. F. Sampaio's book *L'intuition dans la philosophie de Jacques Maritain*, Paris 1963 (a collection of the author's previously published articles).

J. Reiter and L. F. Sampaio attempt to provide a synthesis of some ontic and epistemological problems in their entirety. And so, for instance, the former gives

special attention to God. This is exemplified not just by the content of his treatise, but also by its structure, which is composed of three chapters: *Sein und Existenz*; *Existenz und Gott*; *Gott und Sein*. Epistemological questions here remain in the background. L. F. Sampaio on the other hand, in a book devoted to philosophical intuition in Maritain, employs a very broad understanding of the term “philosophy”. Three chapters of this work: *Intuition et connaissance de l'être*; *Intuition et connaissance du Moi* and *Intuition et création artistique* spell out an understanding of the term “intuition”.

The group of comparative works includes, amongst others: E.S. Kite, *Bloy and Maritain*, “The Commoweal Washington”, New York 26 (1937), p. 431 seq.; A.J. Maydiou, *Propos sur deux philosophes (J. Maritain et M. Blondel)*, “Vie Intellectuelle”, Paris 42 (1936) 118 seq.; M. Nedoncelle, *Le thomisme de M. Maritain*, Sens Chrétien, 1(1939), p. 230 seq.; M. Rostenne, *J. Maritain et l'actualité de St. Th. d'Aquin*, Revue Nouvelle, XII(1950), pp. 9-103; C. J. Eustance, *Jacques Maritain Philosopher of our Age*, New York 1946; W. Gurian, *J. Maritain und die Neothomismus*, Deutsch-Französische Rundschau, 1(1928), p. 561; J. Pelloux, *Principi morali e metafisica*, Studium, 3(1952), p. 164 seq.; A. Mastore, *Introduzione alla metafisica della poesia*, Humanitas, 2(1950), p. 152 seq.

An equally interesting literature can be cited with respect to the theory of knowledge, including: F. Renoirte, *La Philosophie des sciences selon J. Maritain*, Revue Neoscholastique de Philosophie, 33(1933), p. 96 seq.; R. Kilzer, *La philosophie des sciences de J. Maritain*, Revue Neoscholastique de Philosophie, 37(1934), p. 46 seq.; L.F. Sampaio, *Reflexeos sobre a epistemologia de Jacques Maritain*, Revista Brasileira de Filosofia, IX(1959), pp. 347-57; M.A. Vallejos, *Immanentismo ontologico de J. Maritain*, Universidad de Antioquia, 30(1954), p. 115. Significant discussion of epistemic themes in Maritain's philosophy is undertaken by G. Van Riet and Van Steenberghen in their works. One must also mention S. Kowalczyk's treatise *Wprowadzenie do filozofii J. Maritaina*, Lublin 1992.

This small sample of publications devoted to the theoretical philosophy of Jacques Maritain shows the overwhelming diversity of philosophical matter treated in his work. Maritain's output is not just diverse, but above all made a significant contribution to the subject matter of realist classical philosophy in its Thomist version, given its condition in Maritain's time.

### 3. The problem in the present publication

The foregoing list of works discussing Maritain's philosophical views in theoretical philosophy clearly shows that Maritain's thought in this area has not received sufficient treatment. Certain gaps still remain, waiting to be

filled. One such a gap is the question of intellectual intuition, perhaps not as such but in terms of its function in metaphysics. Apart from the treatise *L'intuition dans la philosophie de Jacques Maritain* by Ms. Sampaio cited in the above selection, there are no other references in world literature concerning Maritain's conception of intellectual intuition in the aspect of its function in the constitution of classical metaphysics. This lack has been recognized as a gap in the body of literature on Maritain's philosophy and has been my chief motivation in writing this publication. The continuing interest of epistemological and methodological questions in classical metaphysics has been a motive of somewhat lesser rank. The aim of the present treatise is to examine Maritain's conception of the role of intuition in the constitution of classical metaphysics. The question to be answered is largely that of whether – and in what measure – intellectual intuition, in Maritain's view, plays a role in the discovery of an understanding of the object of metaphysics, namely the concept of being as being, as well as the transcendent properties of being, and in the admission of the first principles of being. This problem is not exclusively historical but likewise proper to the methodology of metaphysics.

I have undertaken to consider this problem in spite of the existence of the work *L'intuition dans la philosophie de Jacques Maritain* by Ms. Sampaio. The said publication, however, cannot be treated as an adequate presentation of the role of intellectual intuition in the constitution of a general metaphysics in Maritain, since as far as the topic of metaphysics is concerned it offers more by way of declaration and citation of disjointed passages than analysis or systematic, comprehensive exposition. For example, only 5 pages in it are devoted to first principles and the role of intuition in establishing them. The said work, as well as other references, have, nonetheless, been of aid in deciphering the views of J. Maritain on the subject at hand.

#### *4. The structure of the publication*

The publication contains three parts. The first, entitled *Jacques Maritain's understanding of intuitive cognition*, addresses J. Maritain's conception of intellectual intuition, the various kinds of intuition as well as the role played by intuition in different phases of human cognition. Relying on various statements and “incomplete” characterizations I have tried first to reconstruct the general meaning of intellectual intuition as such as well as its role in pre-scientific cognition and philosophical cognition. The role of intuition in forming concepts, in arriving at propositions and in the process of reasoning is then identified. These comparisons allow the reader to gain an understanding not just of the

distinctive character of Maritain's conception of intuition, but also of its range. It should be added here that this chapter is not merely a repertory-like description based on Maritain's statements. It is rather the result of a series of comparisons and analyses drawing on data from contemporary epistemology, especially Thomist epistemology. This part, in its relation to those following, has a preparatory or introductory character, and in this light may properly be called an introductory part.

The second part, entitled *The role of intellectual intuition in arriving at the concept of being*, contains a reflection on the problem (as such) of the role of intuition in metaphysics. It consists in a discussion of two issues – a detailed discussion of Maritain's conception of being as the object of non-metaphysical types of cognition as well as a no less detailed discussion of the operation of forming the concept of being as the object of metaphysical cognition. Special attention has been given to the problem of the assertion of givens providing the point of departure for forming this concept. This is very important, as to a certain extent it demonstrates the reality of the concept of being as being and hence also the reality of classical metaphysics.

This analysis of the role of intellectual intuition in arriving at the concept of being, demonstrating a strict relation between the concept of being as such and the first principles of metaphysics does not yet offer a complete picture of the problem of intuition in metaphysics. For the manner in which the first principles are obtained by an illumination of the concept of being has not yet been elucidated. Moreover, the first principles have not yet been characterized in several important respects. This is done in the third chapter, entitled *The intuitive validation of the first principles of being*. In this part of the treatise I explore the content of the first principles of being with attention to their linguistic formulas as well as the manner in which they are obtained (by describing the process whereby the concept of being is illuminated) as well as their function in metaphysics with an emphasis on the problem of their place in metaphysics. Ample room has also been given to a discussion of the validation and intuitiveness of the first principles, with their qualification as *per se notae* statements. This discussion of the process of obtaining the concept of being as being and of the role played in it by intuition as well as the function of intuition in determining the first principles appears to exhaust the problem stated in the title of this treatise.

### 5. *The method applied*

The problem formulated above can in principle be considered in two ways: it may be studied in light of Maritain's metatheoretical statements, both those



regarding intellectual intuition as well as those concerned with any of the other topics addressed in this work. Or rather than from the standpoint of theoretical considerations regarding the system of metaphysics – it may be studied from the perspective of Maritain's metaphysical system itself. In the first case, analysis would focus on considerations pertaining to the theory of the metaphysical system, namely all that J. Maritain has said about his system and intellectual intuition as well as first principles as specific elements of the structure of metaphysics. In the second case it would focus on the more or less complete system of general metaphysics constructed by Maritain.

I have not drawn a sharp distinction between these two aspects. Rather, I have striven to present or reconstruct a certain fragment of Maritain's theory of general metaphysics, exposing his conception of the role played by intuition in its creation and in the practice of metaphysics, basing my analysis at once on the givens of the system and the givens of its theory. This elicited more of an analytical, rather than a synthetic-descriptive method. It also precipitated several hypotheses which were not easy to defend. This situation was in part due to the fact that Maritain did not leave behind a textbook of general metaphysics, and on the other, to the fact that his philosophical language is often imprecise. The bibliography supplied contains, next to the original texts, references of direct relevance to the subject matter as well as those which I consider typical and useful for a good grasp of Maritain's metaphysical, epistemological and methodological thought. One more thing needs to be added. I have largely relied upon my own material concerning the philosophy of J. Maritain published in 1974 in the form of a small booklet entitled *The role of intuition in the acceptance of premises in the general metaphysics of J. Maritain*. This work has been broadly reinterpreted and expanded.