

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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**Jacques Maritain**

Part 1 of 2

**Maritain Lecture**

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**Mortimer J. Adler**

## **ANGELISM AND POLITICS**

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

- A. My many debts to Jacques Maritain, not the least of which is the insight derived from Maritain's essay in an early book, *Three Reformers*, the essay entitled "Descartes, or the Incarnation of the Angel."
- B. This insight took on greater significance when combined with Maritain's repeated insistence on the Aristotelian and Thomistic caution about the serious consequences of little errors in the beginning.
- C. The beginnings of modern philosophy (with Descartes, Hobbes, Leibnitz, and Locke) are full of many little errors that have such serious consequences in the end.
  - 1. Maritain's early anti-modernism softened as he matured philosophically.
  - 2. I must confess that the opposite has happened to me: my anti-modernism has hardened with the years.

- a. Only one major exception to my view that modern philosophy is largely a regrettable departure from the wisdom of the past—the Greeks and the Middle Ages.
  - b. That major exception is in the field of politics: the doctrine, beginning with J. S. Mill, that constitutional democracy is the only perfectly just form of government, a view more eloquently and analytically expounded by Jacques Maritain and Yves Simon in their two fine books on the subject (Maritain's *Man and the State*; Simon's *The Philosophy of Democratic Government*, on both of which I drew heavily when I wrote *The Common Sense of Politics*).
- D. I would like to do two things today, one of which will, I think, have more relevance than the other to the general subject chosen for this Maritain Centenary Symposium—his moral and political philosophy.
- 1. Comment briefly on the angelistic fallacies that Plato and Descartes foisted on philosophy.
  - 2. Deal with a related political problem dear to Maritain's heart — one stated in an essay of his, "The Person and the Common Good," which stirred up considerable controversy among Thomists when it first appeared.

## II. ANGELISTIC FALLACIES

- A. Plato's view of the soul and Descartes' view of the intellect: spiritual substances or beings, somehow dwelling or encased in bodies: the incarnate and incarcerated angel.
  - 1. *Theological consequences*
    - a. Easy affirmation of the immortality of the soul.
    - b. Great difficulty about the resurrection of the body.
    - c. Heroism of Aquinas in adopting the Aristotelian view which made the one more difficult, but the other intelligible.
  - 2. *Philosophical consequences*
    - a. The unity of the human being vs. the duality of two distinct substances (like rower in boat)
    - b. Who is Socrates in "All men are mortal, Socrates is a man, Socrates is mortal"?
- B. The Cartesian misconceptions of the human mind, human thought, and human knowledge: attributing to man properties peculiar to angels.
  - 1. No learning from experience (abstraction from sense): instead innate ideas.
  - 2. When it operates with clear and distinct innate ideas, intellect operates with certitude and infallibly (error is voluntary, not intellectual).
  - 3. Intellect operates intuitively, not discursively or ratiocinatively.

4. Man's knowledge of reality is independent of his having experience of really existent things.
5. The compounding of these errors by the worst error of all (this one unangelistic): ideas as *id quod* rather than *id quo*.

(Many of the characteristically modern puzzles in philosophy stem from these Cartesian errors.)

6. One negative fact is all that is needed to refute them; angelic intellect always active; angels never sleep; but humans do (because they have bodies that suffer fatigue and mental action is affected thereby).

#### C. *Other angelistic fallacies*

1. In *psychology*: telepathy and telekinesis
2. In *linguistics*: Leibnitz's universal characteristic
3. In *ethics*: Socrates knowledge is virtue
4. In *politics*: philosophical anarchism

### III. THE POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF MAN'S BEING A PERSON

#### A. Maritain's distinction between individual and person

1. Individual subordinate to the species
2. Individuals subordinate to wholes of which they are members.
3. Individuals, in short, can be means, but persons are always ends to be served, never means.

#### B. This has a bearing on two meanings of "common good"

1. *Bonum commune communitatis*: the general welfare of the political community in which individual persons participate.
2. *Bonum commune humanis*: the ultimate human good to be served by the community, and not subservient to it.
3. The state comes into existence for the sake of the good life of the individual person, who must never be sacrificed for the good of the whole community. Such sacrifice would be justified only if each were simply an individual member and not a person whose good transcends the good of the community.

#### C. Since so much hangs on man's being a person, let us now consider what is involved in defending man's spirituality (without which man is merely a corporeal individual, and not a person—not radically different in kind from all corporeal individuals, not uniquely made in the image of God).

1. We must acknowledge the falsity of two immaterialistic views of man, one more extreme than the other.
  - a. Bishop Berkley's identification of humans with angels
  - b. The Platonic and Cartesian conception of the rational soul or the human intellect as an incarnate and incarcerated angel.

2. We must also recognize the falsity of the extreme form of materialism, that is reductive, holding that mind is both existentially and analytically indistinguishable from brain.
3. What, then, have we left? Only two moderate positions—one of which is materialistic and denies the uniqueness and spirituality of man, and the other of which is moderately immaterialistic, affirming only that man's intellect and will are spiritual or immaterial powers in an otherwise corporeal substance.
  - a. The materialism of the identity hypothesis (note the word "hypothesis"—unproved?): no existential distinction between mental and physical, but an analytical distinction between them. The language for describing mental states and processes is clearly distinct from the language for describing brain states and processes.
  - b. The Aristotelian and Thomistic view of the powers of the human soul, all but two of which are corporeal powers, the acts of which are acts of bodily organs. The acts of thinking and willing are not acts of the brain, but depend on acts of the brain. We cannot think without our brains, but we do not think with them.

*Comment:* brain both necessary and sufficient condition  
vs. brain only necessary but not sufficient  
condition.




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