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15 March 2014

Individuality and the Actualization of Persons in the University

As part of its mission statement, MacEwan University states that it “fosters student success and student contributions” (“University Philosophy”) to society. On the surface this statement seems to be straightforward, actionable, and a sentiment expressed by many modern universities. However, the complexity of such a statement lies in the reality that, whether intended or not, it presumes knowledge of what a person fundamentally *is* (Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* 4). By educating students with certain kinds of mechanisms, meant to promote certain kinds of successes, the university educates students as *certain kinds* of persons.

Presuming a philosophy of human being is not sinister, indeed adopting such a philosophy is unavoidable since universities *must* educate by way of specific mission and particular method. However, (and this is not said easily or tritely) it is vital that universities presume correctly in their philosophy of human being.

In order to succeed in the mission of promoting student successes and contributions, universities must consciously adopt a philosophy of human being. Otherwise, a concerted effort is impossible and success is left entirely to happenstance. This paper will argue in favour of the philosophy of personality forwarded by Jacques Maritain, which envisions men and women as more than the sum of their parts and having a common destiny worthy of hope. Further, it will reveal how orienting students towards individuality instead of personality endangers the success of the university; provide examples of how a philosophy of individuality has arisen in the university; and offer what I take to be the only solution to the problem at hand.

1. Human as Person and Individual

When Maritain uses the term ‘person’ he has a very specific definition in mind, one that is drastically different from his definition of the term ‘individual’. Humans are both persons and individuals and, at the same time, hang precariously between both identities. Illustrating this, Maritain writes that, “[m]an is a person, who holds himself in hand by his intelligence and his will” (Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* 7-8). In this statement, that which must be ‘held’ is one’s individuality. One “is an individual by reason of that nonspecific diversity which is matter,... which makes the components of a same species different from each other” (34), and which “of itself tends to disintegration” (Evans 169). One’s individuality is ‘held’ by that which is interior to it, which is one’s personality (Maritain, *The Person* 433). For Maritain, one is a person by reason of the spiritual subsistence of one’s soul or rational mind (Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* 34). Personality is that which is specifically human and is the inherent dignity of humans (9). To say one is a person is to say one “is more a whole than a part and more independent than servile” (8). Should personality be given primacy over individuality, what is good for the whole human will prevail (Evans 170). Personality not only opposes the fragmentation precipitated by individuality, it unifies the whole human to divine standard. Thus, humans are fully individuals and at the same time fully persons; primarily however, humans are persons.

Therefore, universities should endeavor to engage and cultivate personality and avoid fostering individuality. Speaking to the distinction above, Maritain writes:

My individuality and my personality, thus defined, are two aspects of my whole substantial being, to which correspond two different poles of attraction for my inner and moral development. I may develop along the lines of personality, that is,

toward the mastery and independence of my spiritual self. Or I may develop along the lines of individuality, that is, toward the letting loose of the tendencies which are present in me by virtue of matter and heredity (Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* 34).

Here Maritain illuminates that either personality or individuality can be empowered to guide the whole person. This being the case, it is evident that the university can move to nurture reason and internal freedom, or it can nurture instinct and sensuous desire; the former of these demands the self-sacrifice of the material ego and the latter demands its satisfaction (34). Though individuality is not evil, it is “that which excludes from oneself all that other men are, [and] could be described as the narrowness of the ego, forever threatened and forever eager to grasp for itself” (Maritain, *The Person* 431). If individuality is empowered, personality will take on the law of matter, and “tend to be adulterated and to dissolve” (434). This should be a serious concern for the university since nurturing individuality means opposing the actualization of what is specifically human.

2. Individuality in the University

In aiming to “foster student success” (“University Philosophy”), which is a noble goal, MacEwan University and other modern universities must avoid reducing “the education and progress of... [persons] to a mere freeing of the material ego” (Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* 35). One danger area lies in the extreme end of fostering student contributions to society (“University Philosophy”). Specifically, should universities’ focus on student contributions amount to the suggestion that persons exist “purely and simply for the body politic” (Evans 171), they would be denying personality. This error could surface as representing education primarily as a way to enhance a student’s employability, or promoting volunteerism in

a way that suggests it is the servitude one must endure to enter the work world. Indeed, individuality makes one inferior to society by merit of its dependence on society (Maritain, *The Person* 448). However, the person is “more a whole than a part” (Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* 8). The supreme dignity of a person’s spiritual nature does not depend on a political body and places one higher than the political body (Maritain, *The Person* 448). In the same way that the individual exists for the political body, the political body exists for the person (Evans 171). All of this said, student contributions to society are in no way to be viewed with suspicion, so long as the integrity of the person is maintained, which is to say, so long as the student is affirmed to be “a whole within a whole” (172). In education, as in the wider world, individuality and the political body should serve to further personality.

Another danger area that has the potential to foster individuality, is providing students an immense variety of course options along with a convenient and impersonal way to select and purchase them online. Though undoubtedly these processes were implemented to engage students, and for their practicality, they nonetheless provide an opportunity for individuality to be nurtured. Specifically, they can serve to isolate students and cater to their material egoism by suggesting that desires should be conveniently available. The concern, as Maritain puts it, is that “while becoming the center of everything, the ego is in reality scattered among cheap desires or overwhelming passions” (34). Thus, instead of fulfilling themselves, the students, who are persons, are dispersed and disintegrate (35).

The problem raised here is not about the mechanics or numbers of course distribution; it is about intention. If the offering of a great variety of courses is meant to appease the desires of individuality, then there will likely be too many courses. Likewise, if the purchasing experience

of courses is meant to foster a consumer's appetite, then the intention of the purchasing experience is the problem.

Thus far, two ways in which the university is in danger of asserting a philosophy of individuality have been reviewed: reducing persons to less than a whole and catering to the material ego. While the examples that were given to substantiate these may appear benign, they should be considered within the context of the society they have sprung from. Specifically, the university should be vigilant against an interaction between the popular demand for such services and the well documented phenomenon of rising narcissism (Twenge et al. 889). Narcissism, the inflated view of one's self, tends to be positive for the individual in the short term but is "negative for other people, for society, and for the individual in the long term" (Twenge et al. 876-877, 891). Further, its systematic rise has been correlated with increases in materialism and unreal expectations for educational success. Thus, it is clear that narcissism mirrors individuality. While the narcissist works to satisfy his/her self-important desires, these desires end up having a destructive influence on him/her. Herein lies the concern that the popular demand for increased choice and convenience is related to narcissism and individuality. Such an interaction would implicate the university as a likely accomplice in the isolation and dispersion of the personality of its students.

3. The Remedy for Individuality

Rather than attempting to put out the singular fires described above, what needs to be addressed is the underlying drought. Since "[s]oul and matter are the two substantial co-principles of the same being" (Maritain, *The Person* 430), the abundance of individuality means there is a dearth of personality that needs to be addressed. Here I argue that love is the answer to the concerns raised in this paper and the key to the actualization of persons.

With regards to the concern of lessening a whole person to a mere part, love is shown to be the appropriate remedy; for "...love, by assuming voluntarily that which would otherwise be servitude, transfigures it into liberty and a free gift" (Maritain, *The Person* 450). Additionally, Maritain describes how love alone can offer lasting freedom from material egoism; he states that "...the basic hindrance of the moral life is egoism, and the chief yearning of moral life liberation from oneself; and only love, being the gift of oneself, is able to remove this hindrance and to bring this yearning to fulfillment" (95-96). Love is the only lasting cure for the self-implanting philosophy of individuality. This solution is not offered tritely; it is not lost that love and education are rarely thought of as cohorts in a practical sense. Nonetheless, Maritain extolls the importance of this union:

For man and human life there is indeed nothing greater than intuition and love. Not every love is right, nor every intuition well directed or conceptualized, yet if either intuition or love exists in any hidden corner, life and the flame of life are there, and a bit of heaven in a promise. Yet neither intuition nor love is a matter of training and learning, they are a gift and a freedom. In spite of all that, education should be primarily concerned with them (Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* 23).

Unfortunately, the difficulty remains: how is the university to concern itself with love, which it cannot teach? The remainder of this paper will attempt to touch on a few key, though not exhaustive, solutions.

A place to start: explaining love to students. In *Education at the Crossroads*, Maritain provides a hint for where an education concerned with love ought to start. He writes that "[n]othing should be required... without an explanation and without making sure... [it is]

understood” (Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* 10). Arthur Clutton-Brock, whom Maritain refers to in his book, demonstrates the importance of this concept by recounting his own experience as a student. Apparently not a very submissive pupil, Clutton-Brock recalls that he rebelled against being taught (Clutton-Brock 5). He judges his rebellion a ‘blind reaction’—the result of being ill-informed on why he should value what was being taught. Clutton-Brock is convinced that students “seek a reason why they should do what they are told to do, and it is not given to them” (10). If students are not enticed and directed toward love through explanation, they may be misled by their own individuality and ultimately fail to grasp it (2). Though love cannot be taught, the identity of love can alluded to through examples of enacted love, speaking to what sorts of things one ought to love, and by emphasizing the importance and value of love. It is for this reason that Maritain turns to Clutton-Brock who writes:

Education ought to teach us how to be in love always and what to be in love with. The great things of history have been done by the great lovers, by the saints and men of science and artists; and the problem of civilisation is to give every man a chance of being a saint, a man of science, or an artist. But this problem cannot be attempted, much less solved, unless men desire to be saints, men of science, and artists (99).

Clutton-Brock means that education should teach students how to love all these things, but above all he means that students should be taught, by philosophy, to love the divine. He designates this task to philosophy because “the great effort of philosophy for the last 2,000 years and more, is to explain why we should love things other than ourselves and what things we should love...” (15). Philosophy is the science of human values; it inquires after what humans ought to value and the reasons humans ought to value them. Thus, philosophy is aligned with students who ask why

they should value what is being taught, and further, why they should be concerned with love or what to value at all. Therefore, philosophy alone is suitable to broach the subject of love. How this relates to the divine will be detailed further on.

Demonstrating love to the student by recognizing his/her inherent dignity. Part of the importance of explaining love to the student, is that this action acknowledges the student's inherent dignity. In essence, the teacher acknowledges that the student is fully 'another self' and capable of properly grasping what it is to love. If the teacher cannot recognize this internal dignity in the student, how will the student come to recognize it in themselves? They will be blind to it, and thus, blind to their ability to love. Indeed, Maritain writes, "...what is of most importance in educators themselves is a respect for the soul as well as for the body of the... [student], the sense of his innermost essence and his internal resources, and a sort of sacred loving attention to his mysterious [or spiritual] identity" (Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* 9). Being aware of the student to this degree is an enormous commitment; the teacher needs to be able to identify "...questions and difficulties with which the mind of the... [student] may be entangled without being able to give expression to them" (43). As the teacher immerses him/herself in students to nurture them, teaching is revealed to be the gift of oneself. The teacher must love his/her students "[a]nd through love he can give himself freely to beings who are to him... other selves..." (8). Recognizing the student as another self provides a living demonstration of love and enables the student to see his/her personality.

Advocating contemplation in the university. Helping the student to see what is internal to him/her is not the only thing that is needful for the perfection of his/her love. Without contemplation, Maritain suggests it is impossible to extract oneself from the influence of individuality (Maritain, "Love and Friendship" 236). According to Pieper, contemplation occurs

during engagement in an activity that is meaningful in itself. These activities are not work, nor mere respite (Pieper 21); are accomplished “...with an attitude of receptive openness and attentive silence—which... is the exact opposite of... concentrated exertion” (25); and include the student’s willing acceptance of ultimate truth, which pervades reality (26). In place of the fruit of labour, contemplation yields only that which the student can accept as a free gift (25).

The university is in an advantageous place to promote meaningful activities, which are closely tied to the liberal arts (21). Framework for courses on “...poetry, music, the fine arts, philosophy, or religious contemplation” (25) already exist. These subjects can be taught with the aim of helping students develop “...a deeper and more receptive vision, a more intense awareness, a sharper and more discerning understanding, a more patient openness for all things quiet and inconspicuous, an eye for things previously overlooked” (36). Only when students have exercised these inner faculties will they be able to see what is freely offered to them.

Where education should direct the student: mad boundless love of the divine. Maritain writes that humanity’s “...perfection consists of the perfection of love” (Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* 36). This perfection involves what he calls ‘mad, boundless love’: “the direct, open, naked, gift of the person himself in his entirety, making himself one in spirit with the other” (Maritain, “Love and Friendship” 224). However, for the perfection of human life, this gift cannot be simply offered haphazard; indeed it can only be directed at one entity, since the whole of the lover must be given (228). For the perfection of his or her life, the person must offer mad, boundless love to the divine, to God (231). However, the gift of oneself is only where perfection begins, for the gift of the lover has been preempted.

As Christian tradition explains, “[w]e love Him because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19). One cannot give the gift of oneself to God unless one simultaneously accepts from God, the gift

of God. As is that which is obtained by contemplation, this gift must be received freely (Ephesians 2:8). Thus, the person's gift becomes an exchange of person-for-divine, spirit-for-Spirit. Thus, the love of the person is perfected as divine love (231). The exchange has afforded the lover an unlimited inner perspective, where once was a limited one (Smith 92). The mad, boundless lover of the divine is perfected as he/she takes on Love Itself, Truth Itself (1 John 4:16; John 14:6). If this seems inhuman, it is not. Humans must transcend what humans are, to become what humans are to become. If it seems to be beyond the scope of the university, this is because it undoubtedly is, but it is the course that the university must concern itself with, and the one it must set students on. For, as Maritain asks, "...is there anything of greater import in the education of man than that which is the greatest import for man and human life" (Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* 23)?

If universities wish to foster student successes and contributions to society, they must first aim to promote the actualization of persons. Therefore, just as persons are perfected in love, education is perfected in love. Without love, opportunity is the unleashing of material ego. Without love, volunteerism is the servitude of narcissists. Without love, persons cannot become what they were born to become. If I, a student of MacEwan University, should come to "...understand all secrets and every form of knowledge... but have no love, I am nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:2), and my successes and contributions, which are supported by this university, are nothing.

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