Booknotes

Joseph de Maistre (1754–1821) is known in the English speaking world, not just as the French Edmund Burke, who like Burke, very early on and very perceptively diagnosed the murderous direction of the French Revolution, but also as one who glorified state violence (hymning lyrically to the executioner as the most important figure in society). Further, in his anti-Enlightenment irrationalism and absolutism, he is notorious as an an apologist *avant la lettre* for twentieth century fascism. (At least, that is the impression many will have drawn from reading Isaiah Berlin on the topic.)

Apart from the memorable onslaught on the French Revolution, this picture is wrong in just about every particular, as a new band of Maistrian scholars are currently demonstrating. Maistre was not an absolutist in politics – more, indeed, than most of those he opposed, he saw the need for rulers to be constrained by something higher. He was not an irrationalist, but believed deeply in reason, not just of man, but also of Providence. Far from glorifying fascism or anything like it, he actually warned against the tendencies likely to lead to dictatorships based on mere or sheer power. Nor did he rely, as Burke does, on any unanalysed notions of tradition or prescriptivism (the legitimacy of what is old just because it is old). And his famous study of the executioner is presented in the course of developing a crucial distinction in politics between justice and power, enquiring why it is that the executioner, who is the agent of the justice on which we all ultimately depend for security, should be more reviled and shunned in society than soldiers, who often act outside the law.

It is a nice touch that *Joseph de Maistre and the Legacy of Enlightenment*, edited by Carolina Armenteros and Richard A. Lebrun, which puts the record straight in many ways, should be published in 2012 by the Voltaire Foundation of the University of Oxford, Oxford being so identified with Berlin and Berlinism, and Voltaire being Maistre's particular *bête noire*. And while, as we will see, there are problems with Maistre, there are grounds for thinking of him as a more interesting and (in the true sense) more challenging thinker than either Berlin or Voltaire. (Though, if one were to cavil at the Voltaireans, it would be to point out that to charge £60 for a 254 page paperback is tantamount to preventing its distribution to any significant degree.)

doi:10.1017/S0031819112000320
© The Royal Institute of Philosophy, 2012

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000320 Published online by Cambridge University Press

What Maistre's critics see as his obscurantism – that is, his admittedly intemperate attacks on Voltaire and the *philosophes* – is not an attack on philosophy as such, or even a repudiation of reason. What it was based on was a keen appreciation of the philosophical and moral impotence of reason, particularly individual reason, in isolation from any context or grounding, and of the emptiness of empiricism without any metaphysical foundation, points on which he converged with thinkers as different as Pascal and Hume. And while Maistre, from his post-revolutionary perspective was very clear about the consequences of rationalistic hubris (for he rightly saw the French Revolution as an exercise in rationalistic canvas-cleaning and reconstruction, which included, let us not forget, what is now described as the first modern genocide in the Vendée in 1793–4), he succumbed neither to the Augustinianism of Pascal nor to the scepticism of Hume.

What Maistre was, was a particular type of Christian neo-Platonist. In broad terms he saw man as the isthmus between the divine and the temporal. Looking down at the temporal, we are aware that the world is out of tune: indeed we see the whole of creation, in Maistre's typically colourful words, as 'continually soaked in blood, as nothing other than an immense altar on which everything that lives is endlessly sacrificed, until the fulfilment of things, until the death of death' itself. He also says that everything that is groans and tends with effort and sorrow, towards another order of things. The Pauline resonance of these words hardly needs underlining; what may not be so expected is Maistre's (Pascalian?) insistence that we alone of creation are aware of our degradation and of evil – our *grandeur* intimately linked with our *faiblesse*, the one the obverse of the other – but that contained in that sense of our own degradation is an intuition of Goodness, of the divine world from which we have fallen and to which we tend.

The divine world from which we have fallen: so far, so (neo) Platonic, perhaps, but here Maistre becomes frankly and explicitly theological, with the third century Greek father Origen of Alexandria, his master in thought. According to Origen we humans are caught up in a process of descent or dispersion from our divine source, embodiment in the material and bodily world, conversion here on earth through sacrifice and reparation, and (we hope) return to God, so that God will be in us and we in God (Maistre's death of death). Our fall into the flesh appears to be due to egoism, seeing ourselves as the source and centre of our being. Conversion involves suffering, tearing of the flesh, and a humility of the intellect, because de-centering, necessarily painful, means tearing ourselves

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000320 Published online by Cambridge University Press

away from the false centre, the ego. In theological terms, we need to expiate for our original sin through sacrifice and self-sacrifice, and even bear sufferings for the guilty who have wronged us in order that they may be saved (and there are in Maistre, long before Girard, a host of tantalisingly opaque reflections on sacrifice and the sacred, and on the links between them). Even for those who do not share the theological perspective of Origen and Maistre, what they say about de-centering contains large amounts of difficult truth, more than most of us are ready to consider.

But, for Maistre anyway, we humans are not on our own in this process. Just as our reason takes us in the direction of God, through our intuitions of goodness and transcendence, so is God's reason discernible in the world, both in the natural order and in history. As Paul would have it, God loves us and the universe, and is drawing it and us towards him, ultimately through the Incarnation and Cross in which love overcomes hate by sacrificing itself for it. And even aside from the Incarnation, Maistre sees God's Providence as working through history and social order in order to bring the world back to him. It is here that the executioner comes in, because the executioner is an agent, not of mere or arbitrary power, but of justice, and this is also where Maistre sees a key role for the church in the political realm, for the church should remind rulers that their power is not unconditioned or absolute. It should, though, be emphasised here that for all his at times convoluted thinking on the topic, Maistre did not expect priests to rule, so much as to provide a standard by which rulers, ideally monarchs in his case, could and should be judged. He was not a theocrat, and saw a degree of tension between altar and throne as both necessary and fruitful in protecting the liberty of the individual subject.

Maistre's deepest hostility to the French Revolution arises from the fact that it attempted to substitute for a divinely legitimated regime (the church in conjunction with the monarchy) one which had no legitimacy beyond its own power. No wonder then, from his perspective, that justice was lost in it, as it had nothing guiding it beyond the whim of whoever happened to be in power; and no wonder either that Maistre had no faith in democratic movements, which he would doubtless have seen as no more that attempts to stroke and placate the Platonic great beast of public opinion. Having said that, though, Maistre did not completely give up on his Providentialism. Maybe God still worked through the French Revolution, if only to teach men something important (the problems which would inevitably arise from a regime of that type), or maybe (in truly apocalyptic

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000320 Published online by Cambridge University Press

terms) we are in the stage of the total unchaining of evil before the final Redemption.

So, it will no doubt be said, Maistre may not have been a fascist, but this uncovering of his theological roots makes him, if anything, even less relevant to our time – to say nothing of his wildly ill-judged estimations of monarchy and of the longevity of the American constitution (which he thought would not last). On this latter point, maybe it could be said that the awe which Maistre saw invested in old monarchy, and which he saw as fundamental to the maintenance of a just order, has come to attach itself to the US constitution, which is why some people are made nervous when they see that constitution regarded in our time by the very type of progressive thinker Maistre attacked in his day as fluid and permeable.

Irrelevant as he may be on the face of it, in his philosophical and political thought Maistre actually touches here on two of the most live issues of our time, and in a way which takes us somewhat deeper than the standard and circular public discussions of them. First there are his criticisms of the *philosophes*. Maybe rationalism (the belief that individual reason on its own can solve our real-life dilemmas) and scientism (that is, an unsupported and self-refuting belief that science is the only source of truth) have often been criticised by others – though that does not seem to have stopped them – but Maistre goes beyond mere criticism and the currently fashionable anti-foundationalism in epistemological matters (which perhaps has its roots in Hume). In proposing a Platonic solution in recognising a truth which transcends individual judgement, Maistre is giving expression to an ancient view which has been neglected in recent times, and which deserves re-examination. If nothing else, Maistre's Platonic perspective could have something valuable to contribute to the current rather futile wrangling between science and religion.

Then secondly much the same could be said about Maistre's insistence on the need to sacralise the political (and the ethical). It does not need much historical perspective to realise the bloody potential of power without justice, nor to appreciate that the twentieth century was egregiously unrestrained in this respect, particularly by rulers who claimed rationalistic insights and democratic mandates. Some no doubt hope that appeal to human rights and the democratic square can do the trick, but even if this is right, in an era of populist fundamentalism and the Platonic great beasts of arbitrary and shifting public opinion on the street, Maistre's warnings are salutary, as is his observation that to think that commerce can somehow displace

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000320 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the martial spirit and the human urge to spill blood for any length of time is naïve in the extreme.

Maistre's objection to the *philosophes* of his time was that they were incapable of seeing that anything that seemed irrational or old-fashioned to them might be true. He also chided them for their tendency to think that with their individual reason they could be wiser than the accumulated insights of the ages. He saw this tendency to elevate the reasoning powers of the individual as an essentially Protestant trait, though one which has its deepest roots in original sin, as the tendency to elevate the individual self above else. In that respect public discussion in 2012 has not much altered since the philosophic tracts and political debates in the France of the eighteenth century (taking, perhaps, Tom Paine to be an honorary Frenchman here). For that reason alone looking at so apparently an anachronistic a figure as Maistre might be salutary, particularly as he draws on a venerable tradition encompassing figures like Origen, the Cambridge neo-Platonists, Malebranche and Plato himself.

Having said that, though, there is one respect in which Maistre might himself be too much a figure of his own age. He is as much a believer in progress as his Enlightenment opponents. It is just a different sort of progress. Of course, his progress is constituted by the operation of the underlying divine dispensation taught by Origen. It might, though, be thought, a couple of hundred years after Maistre that on this matter Augustine is a better guide than Origen: as far as the heavenly city goes, we remain, in Augustine's words, 'pilgrims in a foreign land, our hope and faith rests in the transcendent heavenly city' and for the rest of time we will continue to be so. Can one really see the working of Providence in the death camps of Germany or in the black book of communism? Nor, if we really believe in original sin *and* human freedom, should we expect to see any systematic improvement either in our species or its arrangements.

De Maistre was not, of course, an academic philosopher – such creatures hardly existed in his time, and he was quite oblivious to disciplinary boundaries which have grown up since, possibly to the detriment of his reputation. However, now that we have philosophy as a profession, the question naturally arises as to whether interesting philosophy can be done outside the university, in prison, for example. In this context it is interesting that a work of sustained metaphysical reflection has emerged from a mind more familiar with 'prisons, hostels for the disturbed and sometimes conditions of real homelessness' than with the academy, and by one who has mostly 'lived in the company of the poorly educated, attacked by

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000320 Published online by Cambridge University Press

periods of mental breakdown and prolonged mental incapacity'. 'Mental Fight', the essay from which these words are taken, won the Koestler prize in 2009 for the best piece of writing that year by an inmate of a British prison, and has now been published in an expanded edition of its author's earlier and strictly metaphysical book. The author is Garvin Rampersad, and the book *The End of Existence* (Sunday Hill Press, 2011.)

Rampersad's metaphysical essay (which was originally published in 1998) does not betray signs of mental incapacity. It is indeed a sustained exposition of what looks like an idealist or rationalist vision in the classic sense. Things should not be seen as existing in their own right, but as being multiply related to everything else. According to Rampersad it is not that things are, but how they are that is fundamental (hence, one supposes, the *end* of existence). At the very least this stance allows him to attack (or, maybe even solve) the problem of induction in an interesting way, through appeal to the essential connectedness of things; and while for Rampersad the world does not necessarily exist, there is a sense in which it is necessarily how it is, innately ordered and mathematically connected. It is hard in a short note to evaluate Rampersad's writing, in part because it makes little connexion with contemporary academic writing, but also because it is so self-contained. But what is clear is that, unlike much academic writing, it is written by someone for whom the questions he tackles really matter, who is passionate about them (though not unclear or obviously confused), and whose thinking has surmounted the wreckage of a life. Those for whom philosophy is a (well-paid) profession could do worse than to take a look at *The End of Existence*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819112000320 Published online by Cambridge University Press