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Leslie Armour

Volume 43, numéro 1, février 1987

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/400278ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/400278ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Faculté de philosophie, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (imprimé)

1703-8804 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Armour, L. (1987). Charles De Koninck, the Common Good, and the Human Environment. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 43(1), 67–80.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/400278ar>

# CHARLES DE KONINCK, THE COMMON GOOD, AND THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

Leslie ARMOUR

*RÉSUMÉ.* — En 1943, lors de sa parution, « *De la primauté du bien commun contre les personnalistes* » de Charles De Koninck provoqua une discussion animée. Cet article soutient que cette œuvre fut mal comprise parce que De Koninck devançait ses contemporains sur la question de la relation de l'homme avec la création — question qui est ultimement au cœur des débats sur l'environnement et les droits des animaux. Il suggère aussi que d'autres œuvres (postérieures) de De Koninck posèrent les fondements d'une théologie naturelle à partir de laquelle sa position peut être défendue.

*SUMMARY.* — Charles De Koninck's *De la primauté du bien commun contre les personnalistes* produced a heated debate when it appeared in 1943. This paper argues that it was little understood because De Koninck was well ahead of his time on the question of man's relation to the rest of creation — central issue around which debates about the environment and about animal rights ultimately centre. It also suggests that other (and later) works of De Koninck laid the foundations, never completely developed, for a natural theology from which his position can be defended.

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## I

IN 1943, in a slim volume entitled *De la primauté du bien commun contre les personnalistes*<sup>1</sup>, Charles De Koninck posed one of the most pressing of modern difficulties: How shall we construe man's relation to the universe as a whole? What is the point and meaning of the universe's existing diversity and complexity? How do human beings, finally, stand in relation to other creatures? In the midst of a war,

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1. Charles DE KONINCK, *De la primauté du bien commun contre les personnalistes*, Québec, Éditions de l'Université Laval, and Montréal, Fides, 1943.

other issues seemed to take precedence — and they, too, were discussed in the book — but De Koninck was ahead of his time in seeing clearly that technology had brought us to an ultimate question: Given that we *can* now do what we want with the universe, what *should* we do?

“Contre les personnalistes” might have many meanings, and the title — since Jacques Maritain, amongst others, called himself a “personnaliste” — set off a great row amongst Catholic philosophers. But De Koninck’s greatest concern set out in that book and in his later response to Father I.Th. Eschmann<sup>2</sup> was to show that “contre les personnalistes” had to do with the need to see persons and personalities in the context of their function in the universe as a whole.

De Koninck was writing before “ecology” had become a catch word, before anyone had thought of “green parties” and before the contemporary animal rights movements had caught the popular imagination. But he had devoted much of his life to the philosophy of science, and he feared that a growing movement toward pragmatic subjectivism in science combined with a set of values built around the idea of “person” could prove disastrous for nature at large and for human nature in particular. His most important message I believe centred around the answer to the question by St. Thomas: “Why did God create the world many?”. De Koninck believed that his own answer was certainly consistent with St. Thomas’s and, indeed, that it was a Thomistic answer.

The whole answer is not to be found in the *Bien commun*. But the quest is continued in *The Hollow Universe*<sup>3</sup> and fragments of answers can be found in other works as well. They point to an incipient — if unfinished — natural theology.

De Koninck was also concerned explicitly with totalitarianism and with its relation to the “cult of personality” which has characterised it in our time. That, too, is related to his incipient natural theology.

In this paper I want to discuss that incipient natural theology as well as to consider the implications of De Koninck’s claims in the *Bien commun* to the question about why the world should be many. Father Lawrence Dewan has recently concluded that De Koninck was right about St. Thomas and the common good, and I shall leave the strictly historical questions to him and to others, though it will not be possible or desirable to expound De Koninck’s philosophy without any mention of St. Thomas<sup>4</sup>. I have no intention of rekindling the dispute which found De Koninck and some of his friends on one side and Jacques Maritain and some of his friends on the other. In part, that dispute was based on a misconception of De Koninck’s concerns. Unhappily, in 1943, De Koninck was too far ahead of his time to be clearly understood.

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2. Charles DE KONINCK, “In Defence of St. Thomas”, *Laval théologique et philosophique*, vol. 1, # 2, 1945, pp. 9–109; and I. Th. ESCHMANN, “In Defence of Jacques Maritain”, *The Modern Schoolman*, vol. XXII, # 4, May 1945, pp. 183–208. De Koninck did not mention Maritain in his book.

3. Charles DE KONINCK, *The Hollow Universe*, Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1960, and Québec, Presses de l’Université Laval, 1964.

4. See Father DEWAN’s entry on De Koninck in *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, ed. William Toye, Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1983.

I shall urge that there are, indeed, important elements in De Koninck's thesis which are absent or do not play a powerful enough role in the writings of Maritain and that, without these elements, "personalism" is in fact a dangerous doctrine. But it is a question of balance and of supplementary considerations. The "personnalistes" of the title are surely not, in any case, "Maritainistes" in any strict sense — and De Koninck was careful not to claim that they were. But some of the doctrines being disputed are very close to those associated with Emmanuel Mounier and his followers — a group about whom Maritain himself had serious doubts<sup>5</sup>.

## II

Basically, De Koninck sums up his position in the *Bien commun* like this:

The texts (from St. Thomas) which I quoted were to prove that *the greatest perfection of the created person is the good of the universe*<sup>6</sup>.

This needs elaboration: The common good is to be understood as the good which would be attained if *everything in the universe* fulfilled the role for which it was optimally fitted. And this is a complex notion.

The first complexity has to do with the existence of God, with His place in the scheme of things, and with our "natural" knowledge of theological matters. The universe, for De Koninck and all the philosophers involved in the original dispute, includes God. I shall urge later that De Koninck needs a reason for this inclusion, a reason which relates God specifically to the issues at hand, and one that is plainly connected to his main line of the argument about the common good. It is the nature of most arguments for the existence of God that they simply seek to show the existence of a being — usually omnipotent, omniscient and perfect — from whose existence little follows about the actual or probable nature of our universe. De Koninck needed more than this. But I do not think this requirement is so difficult to fulfill as one might think.

For the moment, however, we need to notice that it seems obvious that, if God exists, and is himself the highest order good, then the beatific vision of God is, in one sense, the "end" of man and of any other creatures capable of that vision. Yet the universe and each component of it has its own natural good, intended by God, but still its own. Questions about freedom and the manner in which God controls the world therefore arise. Equally, questions about the relation between our knowledge of the common good and our knowledge of the existence of God become very pressing.

The second complexity has to do with the freedom and *uniqueness* of human beings. Men and women are free and there is something very important about that

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5. These doubts are documented at some length in John HELLMAN, *Emmanuel Mounier and the New Catholic Left 1930–1950*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1981; and Bernard E. DOERING, *Jacques Maritain and the French Catholic Intellectuals*, Notre Dame, Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press, 1983.

6. Charles DE KONINCK, "In Defence of St. Thomas", p. 31.

freedom. Each human being is unique and it was certainly not De Koninck's view (despite the curious suggestion of Father Eschmann<sup>7</sup>) that God somehow dictates in advance the role and function of each human being as if He were the ruler of some totalitarian state. Yet it is the case, in De Koninck's view, that each human being *ought* to pursue the common good. I shall argue, in due course, that what is implied is something much like Kant's "Kingdom of Ends". Kant was not De Koninck's favourite author, but the vision which De Koninck has is that of a community of free beings so arranged that the attainment of the good of each is the necessary condition for the good of all.

These expressions "good of each" and "good of all" set the stage for the problem. Somehow the "good of all" has to be the "good of each" if human beings are not to be made into something other than ends in themselves. It cannot be the case simply that there is a "good of all" which *externally* determines the good of each. But, equally, the "good of all" must not be conceived as the mere sum of the "good of each", for then there would be no good which is the good of the universe taken as a whole.

This may become plainer if one notices that there are certain positions which are *clearly* ruled out by De Koninck, and others which are ruled out only as a result of more complex reasoning. None of the Catholic philosophers involved in the argument about the common good would have admitted that the universe is so ordered that the common good is the sum of any set of states of the rationally intelligent and sentient subordinate beings (i.e. of all such beings other than God) within it. The common good cannot, e.g., be the maximization of the pleasure or happiness of such beings. There are a number of evident reasons for this, at least two of which it is important to notice here. One is that the nature of anything depends, in part, on its place in a system of things. Intelligent and sentient beings, for instance, are what they are in large measure because of what they know and sense. Their natures take them beyond themselves and their good therefore takes them beyond themselves. In the case of beings with rational intelligence, this "outreach" extends into the realm of truth, for instance, and truth implicates them in the whole universe.

There is, therefore, some sense in which (for Maritain and others as well as for De Koninck) the whole universe is implicated. But it can be implicated in more than one way. Maritain's suggestion<sup>8</sup> was that this implication could be explicated by means of the distinction between person and individual. The human being is both person and individual. As individual, he is a biological organism distinguished from other organisms in the usual way by a certain arrangement of form and matter. Form

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7. ESCHMANN, in "In Defence of Jacques Maritain", suggests that, if De Koninck were right, human beings "would have just as much choice as pistons in a steam engine". In none of his writings does De Koninck, in any case, subscribe to a mechanical model of the physical universe.

8. Jacques MARITAIN, *La personne et le bien commun*, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1947, tr. John J. Fitzgerald as *The Person and the Common Good*, New York, Scribner, 1947. In the introduction, Maritain says "Thomistic personalism stresses the metaphysical distinction between individuality and personality". This theme dominates the book, a collection of essays, the earliest of which originated as a lecture at Oxford in 1939.

and matter do not literally individuate for the same matter can take on many forms and the same form can inform many things. But “individual” here seems to mean merely something distinct from other things, so that form and matter in various combinations and permutations can distinguish a great variety of entities. A human being, however, is also a person and, as a person, he or she encompasses in some sense the whole universe, at least prospectively in knowledge. The spiritual nature of the human being has elements in common, indeed, with the root nature and source of all reality: Man is created in the image of God. He is not God, but he can, ultimately, share in the beatific vision.

This view of the centrality of the person is a Renaissance doctrine introduced into a modified neo-Platonism in the fifteenth century. It may have first been developed in the writings of Marsilio Ficino, the founder of the Florentine Academy, in the last half of the fourteenth century<sup>9</sup>. Ficino, at any rate, made many adjustments to the philosophy of Plotinus, the chief of which was to locate the human soul at a central place in the universal order of things. According to him, the universe is bound together by love, a rather Augustinian notion. Since the human being extends in thought and love to the whole of the universe, the human being may be seen as embracing (ideally at least) all reality. When, as it were, nature has been turned into knowledge and knowledge into art through the application of love, and when all human beings participate in this ultimate love, the universe will have achieved its end, or as we might say in this discussion, its common good.

Ficino was rightly called a “humanist” and the humanism of the Florentine Renaissance is one of the great streams of thought on which all sane men feed. But the question is whether or not this doctrine is enough.

Does this doctrine turn the universe into a plaything for human beings and deny value to its other components? Ficino did not think so for he imagined that human beings must learn to love all the things and creatures in it. It is rather that, in knowledge and in love, the human being is drawn out of himself and into the universe. Though the content is also transformed, these transformations are meant to include nature as knowledge and to add to it as art.

Ficino was not called to testify by Maritain when Maritain replied to his critics in the dispute, but Maritain was quite deliberately, I am sure, trying to blend the Thomism of tradition with the liberalism of modern Europe — to make the former relevant to the latter and to show that modern values could be saved only if they were put in a more traditional context. Ficino, himself, had read St. Thomas with care (there are 75 references to Aquinas in Ficino’s massive work on “Platonic Theology”) and, like Maritain, would have called attention to elements in the Thomistic corpus which sounded much like his own writings. But Ficino is somewhat more cautious, I think, than the Maritain of *The Person and the Common Good*. Ficino, at any rate, is aware of the ancient tradition that the universe as a whole is valuable and that man

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9. Marsilio FICINO, *Théologie platonicienne de l’immortalité des âmes*, 3 vols., ed. and trans. Raymond Marcel, Paris, Belles Lettres, 1964–1970. (This edition contains the Latin text of the *Platonica Theologica*, c. 1475, together with a French translation.)

must open himself to it and not smother it. In earlier writings Maritain is himself quite cautious<sup>10</sup>.

One might think that St. Thomas authorized a less cautious doctrine than that of Ficino (or for that matter the young Maritain.) For instance in *Summa Theologica*, Part I, Question XCVI, Article 1, Aquinas sets out to show that all animals are naturally “subject to man”. His chief argument is that man possesses “universal prudence”, i.e., a *general* power of practical judgement which can be applied to *any* subject matter, whereas animals possess only limited capacities for specific occasions. This “natural domination” is extended in Article 2 to cover “all *things*” because “man contains all things within him”; i.e., man can in knowledge reproduce the universe within him. He has reason “which makes him like the angels”; powers of sensation “whereby he is like the animals”; “natural forces which liken him to plants”; and the “body itself wherein he is like to inanimate things”. Man does not have dominion over the angels, because angels are rational beings and nothing can legitimately have dominion over reason, but he has legitimate dominion over everything else. One *might* infer from this that man can dispose of the rest of creation according to his will just as God can dispose of man according to his will.

In *The Person and the Common Good*<sup>11</sup> Maritain called upon St. Thomas’s saying that “the person is the most noble being in all of nature” (*Summa Theologica* I, XXIX, 3). Maritain’s work was published four years after De Koninck’s *Bien commun*, and in a footnote he makes clear that the chapter entitled “The Positions of St. Thomas” was written largely in response to it. Maritain also makes clear that he is aware of many of the pitfalls which await those who exaggerate the importance of the human person, but he attacks the Pascalian position<sup>12</sup> that the self is to be “detested”, and he leaves stand in another chapter the position that the human person is of overwhelming importance in the universe. Only the human person, he tells us, is created in the image of God and only the person encompasses all of reality. If left by itself, this position would seem to render foolish the questions raised by environmentalists and animal rights proponents.

The quotations which Maritain cites from St. Thomas seem, furthermore, to give a different stress to the importance of the human person than that given by Ficino. But there is another line of thought in St. Thomas himself.

Indeed, throughout Part I, Questions XLVII, XLVIII, and XLIX of the *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas argues — against those who thought that God only made some things and that the rest of the world proceeded from secondary causes — that God is responsible for the whole of creation, that all of it is good, and that all of it is intended to work together. In that case, each thing must have a value of its own.

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10. See for instance the cautions against certain kinds of idealism in *Réflexions sur l'intelligence*, Paris, Nouvelle Librairie Nationale, 1924, and the warning about “angelism” in his commentary on Descartes in *Trois réformateurs*, 1932, translated as *Three Reformers*, New York, Scribner, 1940.

11. The chapter in *The Person and the Common Good* entitled “The Positions of St. Thomas” was clearly written in response to De Koninck. A footnote mentions Father Eschmann’s critique and speaks of the controversy without, however, mentioning either De Koninck or his book by name.

12. *The Person and the Common Good*, ch. III, “Individuality and Personality”.

Aquinas argues that of course everything *does* have a value of its own. Even Satan, since he has being, has some good in him.

The obvious reconciliation of these propositions must come from the fact that man is limited by his relation to God. He is master only within the world, that is only within the plan of God.

There *is* thus a good of the whole and we must therefore ask how man *is* related to God *and* to that whole which is the universe. It is not enough that we should expand our personalities so as to master all our possibilities. Indeed, De Koninck argues here that a subtle inversion has taken place in the kind of argument used by many who would call themselves personalists: The good is not in our knowledge or our experience of it. This is especially true of the beatific vision<sup>13</sup>. It is not our vision which is good but the object within it which is good. So, too, it is the things known which form a significant part of the good, not simply our knowledge of them.

### III

In *The Hollow Universe*, De Koninck approaches this point. There he talks about the fact that we not only have sensations, we know that we have sensations. We have powers of reflection which require for their exercise a certain transcendence. Indeed, against the Marxists and others, he argues that human action itself demands a certain transcendence. And in an article published in 1962 De Koninck speaks extensively of the transcendence of time in the process of evolution<sup>14</sup>.

One might expound the situation this way: plants are mainly bound by the time in which they find themselves. But even they organize matter across a span of time. Mere material objects have natures which could be revealed by inspection at a limited sub-set of the moments of the time in which they exist. But plants could not be understood if the universe were stopped suddenly and we had only available a single slice of time or a few seconds abstracted from their lives. As they organize across time, so eternity beings to appear in the world. That is, in the life of a plant intelligibility surpasses the merely momentary, and never appears all at once *in* time. We have the first intimations that time is not ultimate. Animals are slightly less temporal: they can concentrate time, for they can pay selective attention to things. The plant goes on with its natural processes in a rhythm which is fixed, but the dog will sit for hours beside the table, hardly noticing the passage of time, if he thinks there is food to be had. When one gets to thought, time has a different meaning: one must still remember the beginning of a sentence when one comes to the end; one must associate (and so transcend) the time of the end and the time of the beginning.

Ultimately, this kind of argument leads toward an Augustinian view of time — time is the distension of the soul. The soul is a form (in the Aristotelian sense.) The

13. Charles DE KONINCK, "In Defence of St. Thomas", p. 73 ff.

14. Charles DE KONINCK, "The Nature of Man and His Historical Being", *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 1949, vol. V, # 2, pp. 271-277; and "Le cosmos comme tendance vers la pensée", *Itinéraires*, # 66, 1962, pp. 166-188. This article is an extract from the 1936 manuscript *Le cosmos*.



kind of soul one has (that of plant or animal or man) limits or gives meaning to one's association with time. The interiority De Koninck spoke of in the *Hollow Universe* is thus an intersection of time and eternity. It does not evolve but appears as the form of each creature to the extent that that creature is amenable to it.

The position is *not* the Teilhardist contention that God evolves through a temporal process, but the more traditional one that eternity and interiority appear through time without themselves being compromised by it. The divine spark appears to us through this process. The eternity which we cannot *directly* grasp, we grasp *indirectly* by contrast with other living things and with inanimate matter. But the many ways in which eternity can show itself in the world are all valuable; for they are facets of the one unity.

Thus at one and the same time we begin to get an argument for the existence of God and an account of our mutual obligations to God. De Koninck did not so far as I know ever develop this argument for the existence of God, but one can surely see its form emerging as one reads through *The Hollow Universe*: We begin to grasp the idea of God as it becomes clear that, as we study nature, its multiplicity of forms can only be understood as the emergence into it of an eternal entity which cannot be wholly contained in or fully exposed by nature. Reason can grasp the presence of the eternal behind the temporal and even, if you like, the propensity of nature to represent that eternal. Basically, the argument would be that life as we know it is only intelligible as the intersection of the eternal and the temporal. In *The Hollow Universe* De Koninck talks about the elephant in the zoo<sup>15</sup>. He asks in what the difference between the live and dead elephant consists. Why are we not content to visit a museum of stuffed animals? What attracts us about life?

It is, of course, that we recognize an interiority to the life of animals. But this inner aspect is not a kind of mirror image of the outer animal — something which could be explained by a new kind of molecule. It is a way of organizing experience and, as such, it is not in time in the same way that the objects of experience are. In this sense, it is through us *and* other creatures that God appears amongst the natural objects of the world without himself being changed. The ultimate in such appearances would be the Incarnation. Orthodoxy has it that Jesus was wholly God and wholly man, but his divinity could not be recognized simply through natural cognition. It would take an act of faith to recognize the Incarnation for what it was.

But if this is true, then our function is, in some part, to recognize these appearances and facilitate a universe in which *as much as possible of the divine reality appears*. If one were to expand this notion one would urge that our part, of course, has to do with the fact that, precariously perched between the temporal and eternal, we are also capable of creation. We create art and literature and produce the humane understanding which must play a part in bringing God into visibility and tangibility in the world.

In a sense, *we* add a new level of reality (as Marsilio Ficino insisted). Our art and humane learning add a new dimension to reality, one which flows from our natures.

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15. *The Hollow Universe*, ch. III.

But our aim must *not* be to inflate our own personalities, to create, as it were, substitutes for God, but to advance steadily the development of a universe in which God can become intelligible to men.

In this sense there is what one might call a Mutual Natural Transcendent End. De Koninck, in fact, advances a theory which belongs to the tradition of Bishop Pecock in his *Reule of Crysten Religioun*<sup>16</sup>, a work roughly contemporaneous with the writing of Ficino in Florence. Pecock, who was professor at Whittington College in London, the first of the foundations of the University of London, insisted that the rationality of man showed his place as the being responsible for the balance in the universe. But man is not in a position to determine the good of the universe in his own interest. Just as there is little reason to think that Maritain drew consciously on Ficino, so there is no reason to suppose that De Koninck had ever read Pecock.

And yet these two strands of thought have run together through the history of the west ever since the fifteenth century. Maritain was writing at a moment when the liberty and prospects of the human person seemed to be paramount. De Koninck could see that the future would pose questions about the relation of man to the universe as a whole.

#### IV

From a position such as Pecock's, we can strengthen our incipient argument for the existence of God. For to see what we are and what role we play in the universe *is* to see, so far as that is possible, what God is. But this end involves bringing the *exteriority* of God into visible (or as De Koninck would prefer to say, I think, *tangible*) being in our *external* world. It is not of course that God does not already exist there but that He is not apparent to us unless we meet the necessary conditions for awareness of Him. Some of these conditions are surely social and political. Some no doubt have to do with religious institutions, but we are also slowly beginning to realize that some have to do with our treatment of the natural world as well. De Koninck's interest in science was in no sense in conflict with his religious interests.

There is an interiority to God as well (if the argument holds), and this could be revealed to us only in some other way — ultimately only by the supernatural effect which was traditionally called the beatific vision. It is for this reason, I am sure, that De Koninck wrote a good deal by way of religious meditation. (The most impressive is *Ego Sapientia*, Québec and Montréal: Laval and Fides, 1943.)

It is this relation to God and creation which, finally, binds us together and poses dramatic problems for us: Obviously, there are limits to what we can do to nature; obviously, as well, they are not absolute. We are not forbidden to touch nature in any of its forms. What we must be certain of is that when we touch nature we do so in the

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16. Reynaud PECOCK, *The Reule of Crysten Religioun*, Oxford, the University Press for the Early English Text Society, 1927. Pecock died about 1460. Of creatures other than man he says (p. 43) "ye moost parfijit natural good of every creature and moost desirable natural liking good to hym, stondith in ye moost worthi worchingis and dedis of his moost worthi powers."

name of the common good, and the common good requires, amongst other things, as much variety in the universe as is consistent with the creation of the world in which God becomes manifest.

In short, there is a principle of maximal variety, tempered, obviously, by the fact that variety cannot be justified if it excludes or seriously impedes higher order values. If variety conflicts in any serious way it must be justified in terms of specific values of its own. For instance, it seems evident that there is a powerful case for the preservation of whales on the ground that they have a distinct mode of interiority. The fact that we might gain some momentary advantage by wiping them out cannot justify us in doing so. Even if whales were inconvenient to us, this argument would not be touched. For there is plenty of evidence that there is a distinct whale kind of experience through which some of the divine interiority is made manifest. When it comes to the anopheles mosquito — the malaria producer of the world — it is not clear that its mode of experience is either significantly different from that of less dangerous mosquitoes or significantly better for preserving the lives, say, of insect-eating birds. Perhaps we are well justified in wiping them out. At any rate, on the principle in question, the matter can be rationally debated with some hope of a reasonable outcome. When it comes to the Norway rat, matters will be more difficult. For rats have a developed mode of experience which may be unique to their kind. If a rat-borne plague threatened the whole human race — and that is, after all, possible, — then the case for the rat would be difficult to make. As it is there are many compromises possible between rats and men. At any rate, we can surely assemble the facts in the light of the principle — something which cannot be done in the conflicts of intuition which seem usually to animate such debates.

## V

The questions which are posed by De Koninck's views in a practical way, have to do with the notions of personality, community and human obligation. Maritain agreed that the propagation of "selfishness" is to be resisted. But by implication he subscribes to the principle of maximal development of personality which needs to be looked at closely. As an example of such a personality he cites Jesus: "No personality is more magnificently asserted than that of Christ"<sup>17</sup>. Many people, I suppose, would endorse such a claim. It is not clear what Maritain meant by a "magnificent assertion of personality", but I think it is rather widely believed that Jesus had a "charismatic" personality of the kind ascribed to modern evangelists — the ability to attract large crowds and to move them to conversion by arousing powerful emotions. Even more widespread is the supposition that Jesus worked in some measure by what is often called "force of personality". It is this kind of thing which prompted the British philosopher McTaggart to remark that he could accept Christianity but for the unacceptable character of Jesus. But there is, I must confess, little that I can find in the New Testament which gives credence to this belief. Jesus was often rejected. His followers seem to have been few.

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17. *The Person and the Common Good*, ch. III.

The fear which he engendered in his opponents seems to have been, rather, that perhaps he spoke the truth. Hence, the famous remark attributed to Pontius Pilot. (De Koninck remarks in *Ego Sapientia* that tradition has it that the Virgin Mary did not say that she had wisdom, but that she *was* wisdom.) The problem for Christianity has always been, I think, that the Christian truth was not obvious and that Jesus did *not* effect instant mass conversions. So orthodoxy has it that the logic of reason and the light of faith are *both* necessary to discover that he *was* speaking the truth.

Indeed, the ideal community seems unlikely to be one in which everyone swells his personality to the utmost. This is what C.S. Lewis in his famous controversy with his fellow literary critic and scholar E.M.W. Tillyard called “the personal heresy”<sup>18</sup>. Lewis was talking, of course, about the thesis that to read poetry, for instance, “is to become acquainted with the poet”. This implies that a great poet is somehow “a great person”. A society composed of “great persons” in this sense would be an intolerable bore and also fraught with endless conflict. Lewis thought, instead, that a great poet was one who told some great *truth* in a way which was unique to poetry.

The clearest alternative to “personalism” is the Kantian notion of the Kingdom of Ends — the community in which *everyone* is necessary because everyone performs a unique function and everyone performs a function which is uniquely valuable. In such a society, no one can push anyone else around.

It is not so easy to reconstruct De Koninck’s exact position because it is scattered across his writings over many years and because he died quite young and without any opportunity to pull the loose ends together. I shall therefore indulge in some speculation where it is necessary to fill in the gaps.

De Koninck was not especially fond of Kant for various reasons, but his basic principle is not far from the Kantian Kingdom of Ends except, once again, (and the “except” *is* very important) that he would go further, I think. Kant in his “critical” period was not greatly concerned with the universe of non-human living things nor with the natural universe itself. For this universe he thought to be known to us only in a way which told us more about how the human mind worked than about nature itself. De Koninck however thought that we had objective knowledge of nature, and he set his human society in a *universe* in which there is a common aim, given by God. For him, the entities with whom and which morality was concerned included animals, birds, insects and plants. Indeed, the inanimate nature which gives rise to life plays its own part in the story. One can see what he was getting at if one reads *The Hollow Universe*.

One’s task, on this view, is to discover one’s function in the totality. The claim is not, however, that one’s function is somehow pre-determined, but rather that discovering one’s place in the system involves considering the function of everyone else. One cannot know everything about everyone (even if it would be desirable to do so) but one can choose one’s own function in such a way as to contribute something unique to the whole while maximizing the possibility for others to make their contributions.

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18. C.S. LEWIS and E.M.W. TILLYARD, *The Personal Heresy*, London, Oxford University Press, 1939.

Within the purely human context, therefore, open societies are to be preferred to closed ones; economies maximizing individual creativity are to be preferred to economies maximizing drudgery; stable human relations which free their participants to make their own contributions to the whole are to be preferred to transitory human relations in which the participants spend their time constantly trying to forge new associations. Pluralism of political structures is to be preferred to monolithic structures.

This was the basis of De Koninck's 1954 defence of federalism in his essay *La confédération, rempart contre le grand état*, in which he argued that federal structures are necessary to resist "le grand état"<sup>19</sup>. A federal system allows many different choices and minimizes the chance that all power will be located in one place. It also makes possible the retention of traditional — and stable — social arrangements which, in a country like Canada, vary considerably from group to group and place to place. Finally, it permits a variety of economic strategies designed to take advantage of the diversity of skills and interests.

But the present clash between technology and environment requires that weight be given to the conception of the *totality of nature* and that this be balanced off against purely human concerns. For this reason, one must face up to the purpose and function of nature as a whole.

## VI

The remaining problem was suggested in the previous section — particularly when one considers not just the literary "personal heresy" derided by C.S. Lewis, but the much more damaging "cult of personality" which seems to afflict political life not only under totalitarian regimes but even, to an important extent, in democratic regimes as well.

If the common good is the development of personality — if even Jesus is to be thought of as a "magnificent personality" — then, of course, those who have such developed personalities are, at least, to be regarded as models, and everything else falls into relative insignificance. Perhaps, on such a view, a whole nation might be justified if it produced a single great personality.

It should be recalled that De Koninck's *Bien commun* was written in 1943 and that it was specifically directed against the totalitarian regimes of the hour, especially those of Mussolini and of Hitler. Mussolini had not been without his followers amongst Catholic philosophers, though, by then, both he and Hitler had appeared fairly clearly for what they were. The publication of De Koninck's book, however, occurred at a time when what naturally came to mind were events in France. Those events were still in process. Marshal Petain still ruled in Vichy, after a fashion. General de Gaulle had taken charge of the opposition.

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19. Charles DE KONINCK, *La confédération, rempart contre le grand état*, Commission Royale, Québec, 1954.

Pétain had seemed the man of the hour, just because of his prestige and because he seemed to personify certain ideals of the patriotic French character. De Gaulle, in effect, created his own regime with very little official authority. But, he, too, had “personality”. Material in the De Koninck archives makes clear that Maritain had tried to recruit De Koninck to the Gaullist side. But De Koninck refused partly because he distrusted all such rule by personality, and partly because as a philosopher and at such a distance he did not want to take sides in such a situation. Both sides had the makings of the kind of personalist totalitarianism which he simply declined to support. De Gaulle, of course, was no Hitler, Mussolini or Stalin and, certainly, no Pétain. But as the events of 1958 were to show, his methods were not always democratic, either. But this was not a long-term dispute between De Koninck and Maritain. At the end of the war, Maritain declined De Gaulle’s offers of office, too. (He later represented France at UNESCO and at the Vatican, but he never held strictly political office.) He knew the dangers well enough, but after the fall of France he perceived no immediate alternative. Any Frenchman abroad who did not support De Gaulle would have given aid and comfort to Pétain. De Koninck, Belgian by birth, by that time regarded himself and was regarded by everyone as a Canadian. He could stand aloof from De Gaulle without implying that he supported Pétain.

Much involved in public life, however, was another philosopher who called himself a personalist — Emmanuel Mounier. Mounier’s mentor, Jacques Chevalier, joined the Pétain regime as minister of education in Vichy. Mounier followed him there. Eventually, Mounier broke with the Pétain regime and for a time, made common cause with the Marxists<sup>20</sup>. Mounier’s ideology was, indeed, quite different from Maritain’s. He wrote :

“La personne ne se contente pas de subir la nature dont elle émerge ou de bondir sous ses provocations. Elle se retourne vers elle pour la transformer, et lui impose progressivement la souveraineté d’un univers personnel.”<sup>21</sup>

In his critique of democracy, Mounier said :

“La souveraineté populaire ne peut se fonder sur l’autorité du nombre ; le nombre (ou la majorité) est arbitraire... Quand la représentation trahit sa mission, la souveraineté populaire s’exerce par des pressions directes sur les pouvoirs : manifestations, émeutes, groupements spontanés, clubs, grèves, boycottage...”<sup>22</sup>

He agreed that the state would always regard such activities as illegal but he insisted that such actions “sont cependant la légalité profonde.”<sup>23</sup>

The first quotation suggests that personality can and should dominate the universe, that it can and should make nature its property without regard to other

20. See the account in HELLMAN, *Emmanuel Mounier and the New Catholic Left 1930–1950*.

21. Emmanuel MOUNIER, *Le personnalisme*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1949, p. 29. I have taken this and the following quotations from this little book because in it Mounier sums up his position after having time to reflect on the twists and turns of his thought and allegiances.

22. *Le personnalisme*, p. 128.

23. *Le personnalisme*, p. 128.

creatures or beings apart from God. The second, though it is accompanied by a discourse on the importance of law and constitutionality, seems to suggest that, eventually, it is not democracy but the force of charismatic personality — the kind of personality which leads crowds — which expresses “popular sovereignty”.

Maritain would not have wanted either doctrine even if his philosophy did not, as De Koninck thought, sufficiently guard against such theories. Between Maritain and De Koninck there was, above all, a difference of personality: De Koninck had found his niche in life, the place from which he could do the most for the common good, and though he could and did defend his work and his public function fiercely, he did not believe that this exalted him as a *person*. In his letters he delighted in adopting the guise of a simple beer-drinking Flemish man. Both he and Maritain were, of course, in fact highly educated European intellectuals (though De Koninck’s thought bears the clear marks of his long sojourn in Québec.) It is hard to imagine Maritain sitting down with his friends around a case of beer and revelling philosophically in the fact that the universe was somehow designed to permit such homely pleasures. For De Koninck, the universe was a source of continuous delight.

Maritain, though he rejected the darker struggles of Pascal and Kierkegaard, came from a more sombre protestant background. There is a Calvinist earnestness in Maritain’s writings — a sense that salvation requires our constant attention and effort. The universe is a very serious place. De Koninck thought he would do better to spend a little time laughing at ourselves. This distinction has something to do with Maritain’s view of persons — for the task set for persons is herculean, nothing less than an expansion of content to include the whole universe. De Koninck thought that each of us must do his part, but, after that, humility dictates that much be left for the others and for God to accomplish.

Between De Koninck and Mounier, by contrast, there was a clear difference of principle. De Koninck was, as Ralph McInerny has said<sup>24</sup>, always the philosopher of order. One must find one’s place and keep it — and also enjoy it — but there *is* an order in the universe which should be reflected in human affairs. For De Koninck to assert human sovereignty through “une émeute” would be to admit that reason had lost its place. De Koninck, however, unlike McInerny, was not at bottom a conservative philosopher. Indeed his last cause, a plea for birth control put him on the radical side of one dispute, and he would now, I think, stand beside many who think of themselves as radical environmentalists if that means being against those who believe that human beings can do what they like with nature. He would have his own position — not quite like any of those most often promulgated these days — about animal rights, but it would not be the position that we can do what we want to the other species on this planet.

For him, the first requirement of a social order is that it be founded on reason — not on response to charisma or appeal to intuition. But the final requirement is that it be just — that it give to each person and each living creature the due which follows from the place that person has in ordering the common good.

24. Ralph McINERNY, “Charles de Koninck. A Philosopher of Order”, *The New Scholasticism*, vol. 39, # 4, 1965, pp. 491–516.