

ON THE UNSERIOUSNESS OF HUMAN AFFAIRS: INTRODUCTION

Much will be found in this book about unexpected things, about gifts and surprises, about things that seem most important but which are held here to be "unserious"—and "unserious" is taken to be a compliment. Often in these pages, I will talk about the importance of "wasting" our time. I will suspect that it is quite possible not to learn much in our universities, at least not much about what is ultimately significant. I want to know what to "do" when all else is "done." To what does our "liberal learning" point? Merely to ourselves? How rarely do we wonder about these things! Indeed, not to wonder about them is almost the classical definition of what it is to be "illiberal."

What must be called the "mystery" of teaching and learning will often be pondered here. There will be praise for the short essay, so much so that it will help form the structure of the book itself: five short essays, which I call "interludes," are included between sundry chapters, partly to state things clearly, partly to change the pace of what is being argued. I am likewise fascinated with the prospect of finding seminal books, even of finding them inadvertently in some library or used bookstore. Almost every chapter contains striking passages that I have chanced to read and have not been able to put aside until I wrote them down. Thus, the structure of this book is leisurely, to some degree conversational. Truth, in fact, can only exist in conversation, to recall an observation of Plato.

But though this book's tone is informal, it is about ultimate things and their status among us. We do not much talk about these things, I know. But how ironical, never to consider what is of the highest moment! It is not that our modern preoccupation with politics and economics is a bad thing. Rather, this book points to the fact that these disciplines and realities will not be well-ordered unless we have some sense both of our own order, our "self-discipline," and of what is beyond them. What is beyond is something we have largely forgotten or, more likely, rejected. The "radical" nature of this book, the essence of which is emphasized by the centrality of the word "unserious," is the effort to reaffirm the truth of the central tradition of our culture: man is not the highest thing in existence even though his being, as such, is good—and it is good to be. Recognizing this truth does not lessen human dignity but enhances it.

I have placed at the beginning of the book five classic citations that, to me, guide the spirit of what is written here. One is from Plato, one from Dionysius, one from Dante, one from Boswell, and one from Tolkien. I suggest that, before reading anything in this book, the reader take some time to reflect on each of these passages. In effect, they exhort us, remind us about things we must consider if we would be whole. Thus, we seek to know if our nature is philosophic. Do we know our place in reality? Things are connected, including human things. Any thing, if we think deeply enough about it, can lead us to everything. For instance, when we know a beautiful thing, including a beautiful human thing, something worthy in itself, we reach beyond ourselves; indeed, we are *called* beyond ourselves. We do some things just because they are beautiful. Nor are all things merely repetitions of the past. The new really occurs.

The reader will find many of my friends in this book, both friends that I know and, as I try to suggest in Chapter 5, many whom I have never met, yet know through reading, through having been taught about them and by them. I do not hesitate to

cite Charlie Brown and his sister Lucy as philosophical authorities alongside real heroes like Aristotle, Augustine, G. K. Chesterton, Samuel Johnson, Josef Pieper, and many others with whom the reader, I hope, will become familiar. I cite these diverse authorities to help me show that the highest things have a certain lightness about them. We sometimes confuse ourselves by thinking that solemn things cannot also be joyful things. But Chesterton once remarked that he did not see why something that is true could not also be funny. There is no reason to separate gaiety from significance. The truth is joyful. The being of things is ultimately rooted in delight, in a delight that we do not "make" but discover to be already there, to be somehow given to us.

The subtitle of this book—*Teaching, Writing, Playing, Believing, Lecturing, Philosophizing, Singing, Dancing*—will, at first sight, seem odd. Each word is, of course, intended to point to some aspect of the leisured or "unserious" life that we are asked to live. Such things exist in our freedom and in our enchantment. Leon Kass, in a remarkable book, *The Hungry Soul: Eating and the Perfecting of Our Nature*, has shown how the most basic aspects and needs of our nature are eventually transformed into something higher, into something that exists at a more rare and delightful level. We are, no doubt, wont to speak of "serious teaching" or "serious work," "serious writing" or even "serious play." Yet, we are told by Plato that our lives are not particularly serious. Actually, what Plato had in mind was something most profound: our lives have a certain importance, but only in the light of the seriousness of God.

Thus, the highest things, even prayer and belief, require a certain playfulness about them. It is only when we realize that human affairs stand not simply by themselves but relate us to our end—to our transcendent destiny—that we can relax about what we are, indeed, *become* what we are. What is written here is intended to direct us, or better perhaps to "re-direct" us, in those activities that naturally belong to us. Throughout the book, the theme recurs: what is it about our lives that makes them worth living?

Because the author of this book is a teacher, the reader need not be surprised that teaching and learning, and their impediments, often come up here. The author is also a Catholic and a priest. Of course, one need not apologize for what he is. But one needs to account for why things are of interest to him. Things Catholic rather make sense to me. I have read the arguments against what I hold. They are interesting and need to be reckoned with. If I am not convinced by them, it is only because I find them unconvincing. On the other hand, if things do make sense, it seems right to make the case for them. If there is any ultimate intellectual cause of unbelief, I have often thought, it is because there is too much delight and joy, not too little, in the world. For many, the evil in the world overshadows the good, obscures it, and even causes its denial. But it is the fact of joy that is the real mystery of our being.

This book is written, then, against the background of something that "need" not exist: the world itself and ourselves within it. We are, but we need not be. That this "not-needing-to-exist" is rather the best thing about us, that we need not exist but do—this is the theme of this book. The highest things cannot be such that, in their pursuit, we are deprived of the joy in which they "rest," to use a word that Augustine was fond of. How to go about speaking of these things? What I attempt here is a beginning. I want to provide a way of seeing and speaking about the highest things. Our human affairs are not "slavish," as Plato reminded us. We are free in their pursuit. Yes, it is quite likely, as Dante intimated, that only our "maker" can fully enjoy it all. Yet, that tiny portion of the highest things that

we can enjoy, as Aristotle says, is worth all our time and effort (*Ethics*, X, 1105b30-1178a1).

This book, then, stands in the spirit of that philosopher who, in the *Republic*, finally "turned around" to realize that what he had considered real and serious was not so. Like Plato, we must take a certain initial step, one which allows us finally to realize that our major task is not to make our world but to respond to a reality *that is*. How do we respond? How else but by telling others about it, and by singing, dancing, even making offerings and praising a world in which we finally realize that our own lives have a certain "seriousness," to be sure, but are nothing compared to the reality to which we are open but which we do not make. It is this which causes us finally to "go out of ourselves," to be what we really are because we realize that we cannot be "self-sufficient." "In every age," as Tolkien said, "there come forth things that are new and have no foretelling." This is why human affairs are ultimately "unserious," for we do not "control" all that we are. We remain beings to whom much is given, including our openness to the highest things. The fact that we realize, with Dante, that "the maker" may be the only one to "enjoy it all" only means that our own joy exists in a freedom that makes the affairs that so absorb us seem utterly "unserious" by comparison.

Contrary to writers from Epicurus and Marx, the world need not be lessened by our attention to the highest things. Indeed, unless we know and strive for what is serious beyond our own enterprises, we will end up making the world our god, a role for which it was not intended.