

# *The Existential Ethics of Maritain and Rahner*

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## Introduction

The paradoxical Sartrean proclamation that “man is condemned to be free” rolls down the corridors of the twentieth-century. Although this proclamation strikes us as bizarre in its formulation, both Rahner and Maritain agree in holding that freedom is inescapable. We cannot escape the exercise of freedom, a freedom which is not simply a series of unrelated actions, of neutral import, easily withdrawn, without consequence, but a freedom which in its finality aims at nothing less than the total enactment of the person.

Sartre makes several incredible claims toward the end of *Being and Nothingness*. The great atheistic existentialist argues that “to be man means to reach toward being God.” Thus, continues Sartre, “man is the being whose project is to be God.”<sup>1</sup> How is this to be accomplished? It is the goal of human freedom, and yet it is impossible. For to achieve it man would have to be a “freedom thing,” a “being-for-itself and in-itself,” the fusion of consciousness and being. But, as freedom implies lack, man’s project is doomed, but he cannot escape the attempt.

Furthermore, the condition of human freedom is an essenceless, and yet human, reality. There is no law of nature, or human nature, to realize. Essence annuls freedom. Freedom and law are incompatible.

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<sup>1</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), p. 724.

Freedom posits its own values and the source is passion. The ground of an existential ethics is the lack of being and the striving toward a contradictory ideal. For Sartre freedom and the responsibility to universalize freedom for all humankind is the ultimate value.

The Sartrean backdrop helps us to locate the existential nature of Rahner and Maritain's existential ethics. It is the aim of this comparative paper to explore the themes of human freedom; the tension between person and nature; God and the existential condition. Such a discussion must culminate in the crucial theme of freedom and the moral law and the pivotal role of conscience, noting here the difference between the existential ethics of Rahner and Maritain and that of Sartre.

### Human Freedom

As with all of Rahner's thought, human freedom emerges within the infinite horizon of being, disclosed through transcendental experience. Spirit, in effect, means the transcendence of the person beyond any categorial object toward the unthematic "grasp of absolute being and absolute good."<sup>2</sup> Or, as Rahner boldly declares in *Hearers of the Word*, "man is the absolute transcendence toward the absolute value which is God's pure being."<sup>3</sup> Spirit as transcendence displays an *a priori* and essential openness to being. The human subject is "pure openness for absolutely everything, for being as such."<sup>4</sup> This *a priori* structure is revealed to spirit in every act of everyday knowing and willing, because, as knowing discloses categorial, and hence discloses limited objects, the realization of limits is at the same time a surpassing of all limit. So, Rahner's famous pre-apprehension of being is antecedent to all knowing, permitting, in fact, the actualization of the potency for knowledge. Accordingly, "in knowledge not only is something known, but the subject knowing is always co-known."<sup>5</sup> We achieve self-awareness in and through the act of knowing; spirit is being-present-to-itself. Likewise, it must be emphasized that spirit is luminous to itself

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<sup>2</sup>Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. XVI, trans. David Morland O.S.B., (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), p. 25.

<sup>3</sup>Karl Rahner, "Hearers of the Word," trans. Joseph Donceel, in *A Rahner Reader*, ed. Gerald A. McCool (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), p. 42.

<sup>4</sup>Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978), p. 20.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 18.

by way of its free acts. Our free acts do not simply posit something external to ourselves. Rather, as we move toward self-enactment, we must take possession of ourselves and of our creative powers. This is only accomplished through the return of the subject to itself, which is only possible for spirit as incarnate. Spirit's incarnational existence is, moreover, necessary for freedom. Rahner concludes, therefore, that "free action is luminous in itself" while "dark for others."<sup>6</sup>

As present-to-oneself in the presence of the other and as experiencing the transcendence of spirit beyond all limited objects, the human person transcends himself in a way that orients him toward God. Rahner concludes that the essential nature of freedom is only conceivable in and through the transcendent reference of the human spirit in knowledge and freedom to that being, or rather person, whom we call God."<sup>7</sup>

Thus, freedom moves toward or away from God with the final disposition of the human subject held in the balance. True, it is that freedom is primarily directed toward the objects of experience, and through our actions we become what we are, nonetheless—and here Rahner is emphatic—freedom "is primarily and unavoidably concerned with God himself."<sup>8</sup> How does freedom stand with Maritain?

To recapitulate in detail Maritain's philosophy of freedom would be out of place. Instead, let us briefly re-state some of the essentials of Maritain's doctrine in order to formulate, in comparison with Rahner, his existential ethics.

The person is possessed of appetites which in themselves are blind. Yet the appetites are powers tending toward either the good of the senses or the good as apprehended by the intellect. The appetite as informed by the intelligible good is the will. The will requires a judgment to produce its proper object. The primordial act of the will is to love, and thus the goal or ultimate end of the will lies in the surrender of itself to the desired end.

Furthermore, prior to the judgments of the intellect concerning the good, "there are in the will," writes Maritain in his work on Bergson, "upon the simple apprehension of a good, undeliberate movements for

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<sup>6</sup>Karl Rahner, "Hearers of the Word," p. 39.

<sup>7</sup>Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. XVI, p. 66.

<sup>8</sup>Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. VI, trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1969), p. 182.

which we are not responsible.”<sup>9</sup> Yet the full act of the will follows on the act of the intellect. The will cannot will the evil, for to will the good “is the very urge and expression of its being.” Contrast this with Sartre who declares that “human reality through its very upsurge decides to define its own being by its ends.”<sup>10</sup> These ends reflect one’s project, freely chosen, without reason, and, hence, unintelligible.

Maritain claims that necessity lies at the foundation of the will, because the will necessarily wills the “absolute and universal good.”<sup>11</sup> What is not “absolute and universal” cannot determine the will with necessity. Moreover, “in any particular good which it knows,” Maritain continues, “the intellect sees that this good is not universal.”

Rahner likewise holds that the spirit recognizes the limited nature of finite goods within the horizon provided by the transcendental experience of infinite reality. In fact, the absolute good is mediated in its immediacy through the limited good grasped categorially. For Maritain that there is indetermination in the will is due to the fact that all goods simply fall short of *the* good. So this is why “every will, even the most perverse, desires God without knowing it.”<sup>12</sup>

For all the freedom that marks our being, necessity imposes itself upon us through the tension revealed between person and nature.

### The Great Divide: Person and Nature

For Rahner the human subject is “on the way,” but it suffers the internal divide between spirit and matter, person and nature. As finite, spirit requires the otherness of its own materiality and discovers the barrier to its own complete self-realization, dispersed as it is in space and time. Yet matter is required for the enactment achieved through knowing and willing and is required for the self-presence which is mediated through sensibility. Thus, the ambivalence of finite spirit lies in both the necessity of materiality for self-transcendence and the inherent limits due to matter. On the one hand, the experience of transcendence as unlimited and as the goal of one’s striving offers the

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<sup>9</sup>Jacques Maritain, *Bergsonian Philosophy and Thomism*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955), p. 266.

<sup>10</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 572.

<sup>11</sup>Jacques Maritain, *Bergsonian Philosophy and Thomism*, p. 268.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*

awareness that as striving one has not yet achieved the full enactment of one's essence. On the other hand, in the desire for the completion of oneself through transcendence, one discovers the inertia and weight of one's own nature. Rahner makes it clear in his essay on "The Theological Concept of Concupiscentia" that this resistance inherent in the "dualism of person and nature . . . arises from the materiality of the human being, from the real differentiation of matter and form which prevents the form from bringing itself fully to manifestation in the 'other' of matter."<sup>13</sup> The duality of form and matter in the subject reflects the duality of spirit and sensibility. Yet the ambiguity and ambivalence lies in the necessity of matter for spirit's enactment through the otherness of matter, positing as it does the person as "spirit in the world."

But as spirit is transcendence and as spirit necessarily enacts itself through sensibility, it intends the eternal as the incomprehensible orientation of its striving. Rahner holds, then, that "Freedom is self-achievement of the person, using a finite material, before the infinite God."<sup>14</sup> But more than this, spirit-in-the-world requires the community of other finite spirits as the end of spirit is achieved through the love of the incomprehensible One. Thus, Rahner states that "Freedom . . . is the *manner* of the appropriation and realization of the person and of his absolute dignity before God and in the community of other persons, using finite decided materials."<sup>15</sup>

Just as Rahner posits the dualism of spirit and matter, of person and nature, so does Maritain. The person is "one substance," Maritain writes, "which is both carnal and spiritual."<sup>16</sup> Distinguishing between individuality and personality, he notes that individuality tends to dispersal, expressing an avidity to matter, while "personality is the subsistence of the spiritual soul communicated to the human composite."<sup>17</sup> Personality signifies both a "generosity and expansiveness of being,"

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<sup>13</sup>Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. I, trans. Cornelius Ernst (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1961), p. 364.

<sup>14</sup>Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. II, trans. Karl-H. Kruger (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1963), p. 246.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>16</sup>Jacques Maritain, "The Individual and the Person," in *The Social and Political Philosophy of Jacques Maritain*, ed. Joseph W. Evans and Leo R. Ward (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1965), p. 19.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 21.

tending in a dynamic way to the perfection of itself in communication with others in knowing and loving. This communication in dialogue is not appended to personality; rather it is at the core of its essence as incarnate spirit.

While for Rahner spirit is transcendence, the openness of being for the absolute infinity of being, Maritain in "The Conquest of Freedom" likewise holds that "Spirit . . . implies a sort of infinity; its faculty of desire goes out of itself to a good which completely satisfies it, and therefore to a good without limits, and we cannot will anything except in the willing of happiness."<sup>18</sup> At the root of personality, thus, is spirit. Moreover, personality, tending as it does to the Subsistent Good, remains a mystery. This mysteriousness is a result of personality and freedom being "too purely intelligible relative to our intelligence. They exist in us," Maritain exclaims in *Moral Philosophy*, "as something obscure *for us*. . . . Our intelligence grasps them without comprehending them. Even more than the universe itself, individuality, personality and freedom are known by us and intelligible to us as mysteries, and in the mystery of existence."<sup>19</sup>

### God, Freedom, and the Existential Condition

The existential condition in which the human being finds itself is that of a personal subject, never as a purely neutral stuff to be crafted at will, nor to be re-made at a whim. Rahner speaks of the "freedom of being" as being the "transcendental mark of human existence itself."<sup>20</sup> The person is "never just 'something there' but always already 'for himself', 'existing'."<sup>21</sup> Bearing this "transcendental mark," the human being discovers in its freedom the capacity for the eternal, the capacity not simply for an endless series of possible revisions of destinies, but the capacity "to do something uniquely final, something which is finally valid precisely because it is done in freedom."<sup>22</sup> This capacity for the eternal and the need to "do something uniquely final" requires freedom to will death. It is inconceivable that we should endure the

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<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>19</sup>Jacques Maritain, *Moral Philosophy* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), pp. 143-144.

<sup>20</sup>Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. VI, p. 184.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 186.

infinite extension in time and the transitory character of temporal existence. Here, nothing is final. Indeed, Rahner declares in his essay "On Christian Dying" that such a condition is "tantamount to being damned."<sup>23</sup> Rahner discovers in the depths of our existence a craving "for that which is imperfect in use to be brought to an end in order that it may be finally perfected."<sup>24</sup> Yet what is it that is finalized through freedom? Ultimately it is the final disposition of the person as a self before the Eternal, which is God. In this respect, freedom has to do with God. "Freedom is the freedom to say 'yes' or 'no' to God," Rahner claims, "and therein and thereby is it freedom in relation to oneself."<sup>25</sup> Our lives become a response and answer "to the question in which God offers himself to us as the source of transcendence."<sup>26</sup> Consequently, "The ultimate act of freedom," Rahner concludes, is one "in which [the person] decides his own fate totally and irrevocably," being "the act in which he either *willingly accepts or definitely rebels against* his own utter impotence, in which he is utterly subject to the control of a mystery which cannot be expressed—that mystery which we call God."<sup>27</sup> What depiction of the existential condition is provided by Maritain?

In an essay on "The Immanent dialectic of the First Act of Freedom," Maritain indicates how the original act of freedom emerges. The child, confronted with its first potentially moral decision, rises above the deterministic encumberments of its young existence to discover an inclination to the moral good as the good, combined with a deliberation upon the self in an act of self-possession. The child is able to turn away from the clamoring within itself for gratifications, the good that ought to be done, and away from the evil to be avoided. Maritain identifies this as the "primary implication of the first act of freedom when it is good."<sup>28</sup> The second implication of this act of freedom is the realization that there is a moral law transcending all empirical realities, and governing our human actions, a moral law which entails the notion of the morally good act which ought to be done. This leads

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<sup>23</sup>Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. VII, trans. David Bourke (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1971), p. 290.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 291.

<sup>25</sup>Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, p. 100.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>27</sup>Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. VII, p. 291.

<sup>28</sup>Jacques Maritain, *The Range of Reason* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 168.

to the first precept of the moral law demanding that my actions in fact be good. This law points to a separate good toward which I strive “because it is both *the* Good and *my* Good.”

While the child does not think explicitly of God, he does will the good as the good and as the purpose and meaning of his life. Maritain concludes that “God is thus naturally known, without any conscious judgment, in and by the impulse of the will striving toward the Separate Good, whose existence is implicitly involved in the practical value acknowledged to the moral good.” Maritain underscores the claim that this is a “purely practical cognition of God” so that we strive toward God as our ultimate end, knowing “God (unconsciously) without knowing Him (consciously).”<sup>29</sup>

The real test of a Thomistic existential ethics as a response to Sartre’s ethics lies in the treatment of freedom and the moral law.

#### Freedom and the Moral Law

These questions must be finally posed to Rahner: Can one seriously hold to the reality of a “human nature” and to the existence of God, and yet put forward an “existential ethics”? Can there be an existential ethics without succumbing to a massive nominalism, mired in the multiplicity of possibilities entailed by one’s situation, a situation, moreover, which moment by moment transfigures itself? Can we honestly hold to an ethic of radical freedom when one’s choices take place within the necessity imposed upon the person who must say “yes” or “no” before God, even if the person denies God altogether? Clearly, Sartre would hold that Rahner’s philosophy of freedom is totally non-existential. In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre proclaims that “Human reality can not receive its ends, as we have seen either from outside or from a so-called inner nature. It chooses them and by this very choice confers upon them a transcendent existence as the external limit of its projects. . . . Thus since freedom is identical with my existence, it is the foundation of ends which I shall attempt to attain either by the will or by passionate efforts.”<sup>30</sup> The positing of my ends is accomplished, Sartre argues, by a “sudden thrust of the freedom which is mine.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>30</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 572.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*

Rahner is not uninstructed by the arguments of the existentialists. He sets out to avoid a deductive, essentialistic ethics that would somehow treat the moral ought as a mere intersection of the universal norm and the concrete case. Yet there is a moral law; there is a formal structure given to our existential reality. However, this structure does not override the existential uniqueness of each person as he stands personally before the abyss of the "infinity of reality,"<sup>32</sup> and experiences the singularity of the call of the Holy Mystery to self-transcendence. There is a moral law, and this law does not liquidate freedom; rather it is necessary to its realization. In his essay on "The Dignity and Freedom of Man," Rahner claims that "The moral law as such (in contrast to the forced compliance with it) is not a limitation of freedom, since it does after all presuppose freedom of its very nature and turns to it (since it is fulfilled only when it is obeyed freely), and since it orientates freedom to its own essential goal, namely, the true achievements of the person."<sup>33</sup>

Now the question emerges whether there is a "concrete imperative" which clearly indicates how the moral law is to be realized in the concrete particular? A problem emerges, namely, the universality of the law and the array of possibilities that floods every concrete case. Even more, for Rahner, the central issue revolves around the call of the individual subject, who is *individuum ineffabile*, who is not merely an instance of a universal norm. God has called the person to loving surrender in the Holy Mystery. Moving to the complexity of the issue, Rahner maintains that an "existential ethics . . . relates . . . to the *substantial nature* of man . . . as principle of the origin and actualizing of the historic-personal activity," which "must achieve itself constitutively in the positivity of each single, uniquely one con-cretion of the individual decision."<sup>34</sup> The recognition of such a nature does not entail the entrenchment of an essentialistic ethics positing in deductive fashion ethical norms. For Rahner "there is an individual ethical reality of a positive kind which is untranslatable into a material universal ethics; there is a binding ethical uniqueness. . . ."<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, to know Rahner is to know of his claim of a "supernatural existential," which

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<sup>32</sup>Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, p. 33.

<sup>33</sup>Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. II, p. 249.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 228.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 229.

states that "man is the event of God's absolute self-communication." This is a "free and unmerited grace, of a miracle of God's free love for spiritual creatures." For Rahner the supernatural existential "is given to everyone who is a being of unlimited transcendental as a fulfillment essentially transcending the natural."<sup>36</sup>

Now all of this may seem to signal not only the impossibility of an essentialistic ethics but also the suspension of all moral law in lieu of the radical singularity of the supernatural existential as a call and communication to each individual. In the *Theological Investigations* Rahner effectively refutes such a claim: "There can be nothing which actually ought to be done," Rahner states, "or is allowed in a concrete or individual situation, which could lie outside these universal norms."<sup>37</sup> This brings us back to the question which asks if that which we ought to do is only the "intersection of the law and the given situation."<sup>38</sup> For Rahner we must recall the uniqueness of our moral acts and the eternal destiny of the human person. Each moral act is not simply one bound by space and time. Instead, the person's "acts have a meaning for eternity, not only morally but also *ontologically*."<sup>39</sup> Thus, Rahner concludes that while there cannot be a moral science of the individual as individual, there is a "universal formal ontology of individual reality, so . . . there can and must be a formal doctrine of existential concretion, a formal existential ethics."<sup>40</sup> Conscience performs the existential role of recognizing the moral law and the possibilities emerging out of the unique situation in order to determine what is to be done. Such a role of conscience requires the self-knowledge which emerges from transcendental experience, placing the spirit in openness before the unthematic presence of infinity, allowing the spirit to be present-to-itself as one dynamically tending in knowledge and love to absolute being. The infinite reality of absolute being, while transcendent, is nonetheless intimately present to us as the absolute good providing the horizon for the finite goods and values to take their proportional place in the ethical range of possibilities. It is, as always, the transcendence of spirit

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<sup>36</sup>Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, pp. 126–127.

<sup>37</sup>Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. II, p. 222.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 225.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 229.

toward the unlimited good of absolute being which allows for the non-reflective self-presence of the spirit to emerge in all its positive uniqueness.

Maritain criticizes the existential ethics of Sartre, noting that the formal element of such an ethics consists "in pure liberty alone." To the perplexed youth seeking moral counsel, a Sartrean ethics advises that "his liberty itself will tell him how to make use of liberty."<sup>41</sup> Instead, Maritain holds that the root of liberty lies in reason. Maritain claims that there are objective moral norms, that they are known both by reason and natural inclination, but that they are not applied in deductive, case-book fashion. Maritain opposes a Kantian ethics which replaces the Good by the Norm, where Pure Reason attempts to displace God.<sup>42</sup> While there is indeed the knowledge of natures providing formal norms of conduct, these norms are not mere universals, imposing duties and obligations, condemning me to guilt. Rather, objective norms of morality, Maritain reasons, must be "embodied in the ends which actually attract my desire and in the actual movement of my will." The human person "must recognize in them . . . an urgent demand of his most highly individualized, most personal desire, for the ends upon which he has made his life depend."<sup>43</sup> What is at stake here in the obedience to the law is not the negation of freedom, but, through love, the realization of one's own deepest desire, harmonizing "his will with the law (since it remains a will to the good) and makes him identify his *self*," according to Maritain in *Existence and the Existent*, "with the *everyman* who is subject to the universal precept."<sup>44</sup> Expressed negatively, to suppress universality and the law is to suppress freedom which is rooted in reason.

Now, just as for Rahner, what Maritain terms the "existentiality of the moral judgement" is realized through the "judgement of the moral conscience."<sup>45</sup> It comes down in the practical sphere of freedom to the virtue of prudence which alone can determine what ought to be done in the context of the moral situation and particular circumstances

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<sup>41</sup>Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, trans. Lewis Galantiere and Gerald B. Phelan (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), p. 60.

<sup>42</sup>Jacques Maritain, *Moral Philosophy*, p. 113.

<sup>43</sup>Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, pp. 52-53.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 50.

which are unrepeatable and unique to the moment. As Maritain enjoins, "No knowledge of moral essences . . . no casuistry, no chain of pure deduction, no science, can exempt me from my judgement of conscience." Maritain forcefully concludes that while the universal precept is enunciated in the major premise of the practical syllogism, both the minor and conclusion operate on a different level, for "they are put forward by the whole subject, whose intellect is swept along the existential ends by which (in virtue of his liberty) his appetitive powers are in fact subjugated."<sup>46</sup> Just as the first teaching of Thomistic existentialism is "the perfection of human life," Maritain asserts that this is achieved only in charity: "All morality thus hangs upon that which is most existential in the world. For love . . . does not deal with possible or pure essences, it deals with existents."<sup>47</sup>

### Conclusion

Separating the existential ethics of Rahner and Maritain from that of Sartre is the reality and necessity of the moral law, reflecting human nature. Whereas for Sartre God is an impossible ideal to which everyone aspires, for Rahner and Maritain it is the eternal destiny that belongs to every human person, a destiny that signals both the existential uniqueness of the person and the ground of the moral law. Also, for both Maritain and Rahner, antecedent to the exercise of freedom is a pre-conceptual knowledge of God. For each this entails a striving for the perfection of one's being through the love of God and one's fellow human beings with the shaping of the self the result of the exercise of one's freedom. Rather than a condemnation to freedom within an absurd universe, this is the person's authentic and existential liberation.

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<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 49.