

VOLUNTARISM IN ETHICS

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There is a pattern running through Maritain's work from the early writings on Bergson, the reflections on Husserl and phenomenology, and the examination of existentialism and that is a defence of intellectualism in theoretical philosophy or, to be more precise, a defence of metaphysical intellect against those who would deny it, distort it, or attenuate it in some fashion. The rise of existential philosophy to prominence provided a new opportunity for mainstream European preoccupation with metaphysical issues. Indeed, we may now look back at this period with some regret for the present leading lights of European philosophy have little interest in metaphysics at all. The shepherds of being are not to be found.

If Maritain in one section of the "short treatise" affirms the merits of an intellectual existentialism against other forms, notably that of Sartre, the emphasis shifts when he turns from the topic of being to that of action. "We must say that in moving into the domain of ethics this existentialism becomes voluntaristic."¹ He then proceeds to indicate that the focal point of his analysis is on judgment. He accordingly notes that, in addition to a purely theoretical judgment, there are two kinds of judgment relevant to ethics: the theoretico-practical and the practico-practical. Theoretico-practical judgments and theoretical judgments are similar in that their assertions are true or false in the same way, since theoretico-practical judgments are theoretical in mode.² Where confusion is possible is in regard to practical judgments because the truth or falsity of the two kinds of practical judgment are determined differently. Consequently, it is well to point out that Maritain is not defending a voluntarist thesis as concerns the matter of "intellectual moral knowledge",³ or moral science. It seems clear that Maritain is making a distinction between two kinds of practical judgment, and the voluntarism refers not to the first, the theoretico-practical, but to the second, the practico-practical. Maritain had previously developed the distinction in *The Degrees of Knowledge*.⁴

"Intellectualism would be a term which applies to any philosophical theory according to which the intellect is prior to or superior to the will."⁵ Its opposite, "voluntarism", then, "applies to any philosophical theory according to which the will is prior to or superior to the intellect or reason."⁶

To begin with, let us set out two extreme positions. On one hand, there is the intellectualism of Socrates, Spinoza, or Dewey. On the other hand, there is voluntarism, whether it be that of Scotus, Schopenhauer, or Nietzsche. Intellectualism and voluntarism may be subdivided further by referring to the ontic, noetic and moral levels.⁷

Initially, it might be desirable to select unequivocal cases in which intellectualism seems to preclude any role for appetitive influence whatsoever, and instances of voluntarism which border on irrationalism, for reason in such cases are never causes or original influences, but at best an effect or consequence of the will itself. In either case, the tendency will be to set up an irreconcilable opposition between intellect and will.

Now, when Maritain says that Thomism is voluntaristic in ethics, there is a concern that he overstates the case in order to offset a certain temptation toward intellectualism to which Thomism is not immune. When he examined questions of education, he insisted that both intellectualism and voluntarism were misconceptions to be avoided.⁸ When he later tried to situate Thomistic natural law with regard to other theories of natural law, he saw it as occupying a middle position between rationalism and voluntarism.⁹ We shall see that there is no question of a voluntarism à la Ockham. There is no question of a voluntarism which would make obligation rest on the basis of consent, nor of a Nietzschean voluntarism, creative of values. In the war between the "faculties", Maritain seeks to show the role of the will in judgments in which intellect too has its share.

In *Reflexions sur l'intelligence*, Maritain was concerned with "the proper life of the intellect" (*sa vie propre*).¹⁰ In *Existence and Existent*, it is also "the proper life of the will" which is at stake.¹¹ Before entering into an analysis of "the proper life of the will", some attention should be paid to philosophical objections against speaking of the intellect and will as having lives of their own. John Locke is notable in the history of philosophical psychology for having raised this issue. Here is the way he stated the problem. Will and understanding are distinguished as two powers of mind or spirit. The first is "what orders the consideration", the other is "perception".¹² They can be reduced to motion and thinking. Attributes belong to agents, not to powers. "Agents that have no thought, no volition at all, are in everything *necessary* agents." So, if there are free agents, there is nothing improper in calling them free, but, Locke goes on to say, "liberty belongs not to the will".¹³ Leaving aside the problems connected with Locke's notion of basic categories, and his attempt to subsume qualities under relations, the fundamental issue at stake here is whether it is appropriate to employ metonymy, in the particular sense of taking the part for the whole, when speaking of human psychology. It is apparently unavoidable to do so, but is it always misleading and wrong? I would think that the situation is similar to that concerning abstractions. It is necessary in scientific inquiry to use abstractions. One could not imagine a theoretical

enterprise which would succeed without them. Of course, one must avoid the fallacy Whitehead dubbed fittingly "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness," that is, treating abstractions as if they were concrete things. So also the use of metonymy is fitting and meaningful as long as we realize that we are speaking of a part rather than the whole, and when we keep in mind that, indeed, *actiones sunt suppositorum*,¹⁴ as Maritain emphasizes. With these cautionary provisions in mind, there does seem to be some reason, then, to investigate the will's proper life and the intellect's proper life, albeit life is attributed properly only to subjects. I make much of this point because some literal-minded critics tend to frame Lockean-type objections to the kind of discourse one finds in Thomistic psychology. Maritain's starting point in the analysis is to compare theoretical and practical judgment. If, in the former, the will has no intrinsic place, in the latter it is determinant. Consider the difference between Descartes and Maritain on this issue. It is not arbitrary in this context to do so since Descartes is discussed at the beginning of *Existence and the Existent*, and there is a specific reference to his theory of the will. The procedure will be to examine Descartes' position on the interplay between intellect and will, then Sartre's extension of Descartes' theory, and only then Maritain's own position. The dispute centers on judgment. According to Maritain, the "operation of assenting no longer belongs to the understanding" for Descartes, "but to the will. It is a decision of the will, which comes to agree to an idea as a faithful representation of what is or may be".¹⁵ This is the case in regard to theoretical knowledge itself. Hence intellectual error stems from the will for it is the will which leads to "precipitancy of judgment".¹⁶ "Human error", says Maritain, "is explained by Descartes in the same way as theologians explain angelic error", another instance of Cartesian angelism. The point is that assent should be given only to certain types of proposition and it is the will which is responsible when a man goes beyond "what he perceives clearly and distinctly".¹⁷ This is Descartes' psychology of error which seems tantamount to the psychology of fault.

So, in the ethics of thought, there is a rule that one should only assent, or consent, for there appears to be no difference between them, to the clear and distinct. Later, in Malebranche, there is a much more elaborate and refined version of this identification.¹⁸

In his study *The Dream of Descartes*, Maritain indicates that there is an antimony in Cartesian thought concerning the interaction of intellect and will, for "it maintains at one and same time the freedom of the will" (to the extent of attributing to it all theoretical errors) and the principle that the will always follows the understanding (to the point of seeking in the understanding the means sufficient for moral perfecting--*it is enough to judge well in order to do well*), but it 'suppresses without replacing' the solution by which Scholastic philosophy conciliated these two theses."¹⁹

Finally, understanding and will are distinct powers, and "the difference between moral freedom and error" is explained "by the difference in extent of these two faculties, and judgment" is attributed "to the will, not to understanding".²⁰ Maritain points out, as well, that "this voluntaristic doctrine which is already a pretty monstrosity in philosophy, is accompanied by the gravest consequences for the theory of faith".²¹

Jean-Paul Sartre's essay on Cartesian freedom established a connection between Descartes' concept of freedom and that of existential philosophers like Heidegger and himself.²² Concerning the tensions, if not contradictions, in this Cartesian concept, there is some agreement between Maritain and Sartre, but Sartre's extrapolation of Descartes' concept goes far beyond what Maritain would consider authentically Cartesian. Sartre, unlike Maritain, is not primarily critical of Descartes, but rather wants to show some radical implications in the Cartesian notion of freedom which Descartes had not drawn out. Freedom, says Sartre, may be experienced in the realm of action or in the realm of understanding and discovery. It may be an experience of creative freedom through action or an experience of autonomous thinking. In Descartes' case it was the latter. And, indeed, in the French philosophical line from Descartes to Alain, freedom has been identified "with the act of judging".²³ Descartes' position is contrasted with that of Kant, for truth, for Descartes, is not constituted, but discovered. Sartre then points out certain difficulties in Descartes' account since, in some respects, one is free to suspend judgment while, in others, in the presence of evident truths, one is forced to assent. In the second case, Sartre notices similarities between Descartes and Spinoza and Leibnitz. Even when autonomous, the Cartesian understands "a pre-established order of relationships".²⁴ Furthermore, there are "two rather different theories of freedom" in Descartes: a negative and a positive one.²⁵ It is Sartre's contention that the negative kind consists in the suspension of judgment and, moreover, in this power of refusal, the thinker "discovers that he is pure nothingness".²⁶ At this point, it is clear that Sartre is about to effect a transition from a conventional interpretation of Descartes to an existential or Heideggerian recasting in which it is argued that Descartes "did not push his theory of negativity to the limit".²⁷ No doubt this assertion would be correct, if one admits that Descartes indeed had a theory of negativity. What Sartre wants to say is that the negativity assures autonomy but that, when Cartesian freedom is positive, when it adheres to truth, it is no longer autonomous.

The next stage in this interpretation concerns the problem of creative freedom and humanism. After having shown that, in a number of texts, the Cartesian notion of freedom is not one of creative freedom, Sartre now attempts to show that creative freedom is revealed in the rules of method. They provide "very general directives for free and creative judgment".²⁸ As long as freedom does not entail the invention of the good and the

construction of knowledge, man is free in name only. He is "free for Evil, but not for Good; for Error, but not Truth".²⁹ The giant step is taken when Descartes recognized that the concept of freedom means absolute autonomy. That there is no difference between the infinity of the human will and the divine will. In short, Descartes has attributed to God what belonged to man.

It took two centuries of crisis--a crisis of Faith and a crisis of Science--for man to regain the creative freedom that Descartes placed in God, and for anyone finally to suspect the following truth, which is an essential basis of humanism: man is the being as a result of whose appearance a world exists.³⁰

Here a juncture is made with Heidegger's conclusion, in *The Essence of Reasons*, that "the sole foundation of being is freedom".³¹ Even though such a statement surely appears in Heidegger's early treatise, it is a real question whether Sartre's interpretation of it in terms of an extreme metaphysical voluntarism is justified.³² However, the accuracy of Sartre's interpretation of Descartes and Heidegger is not at issue here. What is significant is that Sartre defines his own position as coming out of Descartes and encountering Heidegger. And so we have the well-known Sartrean themes of creative freedom, freedom from the Good and the True and, of course, his philosophy of atheistic humanism.

Now, after the presentation of a concept of will which is the ground of being itself, Maritain's account of Thomistic voluntarism is bound to be very mitigated indeed. In what precisely does this voluntarism consist? What is its focus? There are two instances in *Existence and the Existent* in which this voluntarism, or priority of the will over the intellect, is operative. The first concerns the notion of practical truth. The second concerns the role of the will in the commission of evil.

Maritain has tried in several instances to distinguish different kinds of judgment. For instance, in a series of lectures which were given about the same time as the publication of *Existence and the Existent*, he distinguished between "value judgments" and "judgments of simple reality".³³ What one finds in the present treatise is an attempt to distinguish between the notion of truth as it is relevant to theoretical matters, on one hand, and to practical matters, on the other. If truth is in the judgment, one must nevertheless indicate the differences between theoretical and practical judgments, while still showing in what sense there is an analogical unity in the term "truth". In a Thomistic perspective, judgments of truth share the common feature of being judgments of conformity or judgments in conformity. Truth consists in a conformity, but there is a difference concerning the kind of conformity involved in a theoretical judgment and the kind involved in a practical

judgment, meaning in this context a practico-practical rather than a theoretico-practical judgment.

Now Maritain, after having criticized the Cartesian and Sartrean positions, is led to take up anew the task of elaborating the interaction of reason and will in judgments. In the first instance, that of theoretical judgment, truth consists in "conformity with extramental being"--in knowing what is. And, to the extent that theoretico-practical judgments are theoretical in mode, no doubt they too consist in conformity with extramental being. But practical judgment in the sense of a moral judgment here and now, particularized, cannot be considered true (or false) in this sense; otherwise it would not be action-oriented, but still knowledge-oriented. It consists in making what is not yet in existence, existent. Now, no doubt we are more accustomed to call such judgments right or wrong rather than true or false, but a right or correct judgment is also a true one, and a wrong or incorrect judgment is a false one. But again, in relation to what standard? Let us note that, up to now, little has been said about the role of the will in theoretical knowledge. Of course the will moves the intellect in inquiry. No doubt there must be a will-to-know. Nevertheless, Maritain denies that theoretical judgment, in the final analysis, is an act of the will.

The situation is quite different with practical (practico- practical) judgment for here one begins with the will's orientation toward (or away from) the good. Since distortion can exist, the orientation of the appetite may be skewed. It may also be right (or straight). The judgment of moral conscience consists in conformity with right appetite, that is, the judgment is a judgment of reason in conformity (or not) with the orientation of the will. This is that state of "dependence" referred to by Maritain concerning practical judgment "in regard to the actual movement of the appetite towards the ends of the subject".³⁴ Thus, far from treating both forms of judgment as completely homogeneous, Maritain notes that only the general feature of "being in conformity" is shared by these two different kinds of judgment.

That is the first instance illustrating the voluntaristic side of moral philosophy. The second instance concerns the more particular situation in which heeding (or turning away from) a norm is at stake. In this account, I leave aside the larger context in which the analysis occurs, "the free existent and the free eternal purposes", and I concern myself solely with the predicament in which, having knowledge of a moral norm, the subject nevertheless turns his attention away from that norm and opens himself to evil. Let us begin with a statement of Sartre: "If we do not invent *our* Good, if Good has an *a priori*, independent existence, how could we perceive it without doing it?"³⁵ From the perspective of an intellectualist ethics, perhaps still best exemplified by the Socratic dictum that virtue is knowledge, it is utterly inconceivable that a rational being knowing what is good would not act upon that knowledge. The final stage in the Platonic

dialogues continues to be a search for the explanation of human value-blindness or ignorance. This state of ignorance may be induced by emotional factors, but there is no warrant for the conclusion that the remote or ultimate cause of wrong-doing is emotion rather than the proximate cause, ignorance.

The problem is how to explain the inroad of evil in the free act. According to the analysis this process occurs in two stages, or in two moments. In the first, the existent through its will "*does not* consider the norm of the *thou shouldst* upon which the ruling of the act depends".³⁶ Then, "at a second moment the will produces its free act affected by the privation of its due ruling and wounded with the nothingness which results from this lack of consideration".³⁷ The first moment, that of non-consideration of the rule, does not by itself constitute moral evil, but, if, at the moment of action, one wills with this non-consideration, the decision is a bad one. In any case, Maritain's argument is that the will is the key at both moments, for "the first cause of the non-consideration of the rule, and consequently of the evil of the free act that will come forth from it, is purely and simply the liberty of the created existent".³⁸

Through this intricate analysis of the process by which those who know the norm or rule nevertheless do what is wrong, Maritain in effect refutes the notion that wrong-doing is simply a matter of ignorance, or inadequate knowledge, or the failure to employ an appropriate method. Maritain insists, then, that it is not ignorance which is the cause of wrong-doing, but *ignoring*, that is, acting with non-consideration of the rule. And it is on this ground that the break would be made with the venerable tradition of moral intellectualism, initiated by the great Greek philosophers, perpetuated by some of the Rationalists, and enduring still in moral philosophy. For, indeed, is it not the case that Aristotle himself must be considered in this group, according to one of his most acute modern commentators? "In the final analysis, reason remains the sole source of value, and Aristotle's attempt to escape from intellectualism falls short".³⁹ For the real battleground between moral intellectualism and moral voluntarism is to be located primarily, I believe, in their respective explanation of human wrong-doing. And it is on that terrain that Maritain particularly defends a Thomistic moral voluntarism.

NOTES

1. Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, transl. L. Galantière and Gerald B. Phelan (New York, 1948) p. 47.
2. There are several reasons why I prefer to use theoretico-practical rather than speculativo-practical. First, it is more in line with other contemporary usages; secondly, it avoids the pejorative, or at least ambiguous, connotations of "speculative", often considered by social scientists to be little more than free mind-spinning. When you don't know, you speculate. See *Existence and the Existent*, p. 52, n. 2 where Maritain speaks of two practical syllogisms.
3. See G. Kalinowski, *Le probleme de la vérité en morale et en droit* (Lyon, 1967) p. 129.
4. Jacques Maritain, *Distinguish to Unite, or The Degrees of Knowledge*, transl. supervised by Gerald B. Phelan (London, 1959), Appendix VII, pp. 456-464.
5. Richard Taylor, "Voluntarism", *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York, 1967) Volume 8, p. 270. For a treatise on moral voluntarism, see Taylor's *Good and Evil* (New York, 1970).
6. *Ibid.*
7. G. Kalinowski, *op. cit.*, p. 23, n. 1.
8. Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven, 1943) pp. 18-22.
9. Jacques Maritain, *Nove lezioni sulla lege naturale* (Milan, 1985) pp. 114-116.
10. Jacques Maritain, *Réflexions sur l'intelligence et sur sa vie propre* (Paris, 1926). See chapter 11.
11. Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*.
12. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, II, XXI, 5.
13. *Ibid.*, II, XXI, 13-14. See Leibnitz's comment: "Ce ne sont pas les facultés ou qualités qui agissent, mais les substances par les facultés," in *Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain* (Paris, 1966) p. 147.
14. Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, p. 62. The point is also made by Kalinowski: "Nous parlons de la raison, de la volonté, des tendances sensibles, comme si c'étaient des res autonomes. Le langage n'tant jamais pleinement adéquat à la richesse du réel et aux nuances de la pensée, notre manière de nous exprimer peut laisser croire que l'unité de l'homme est mconnue, que celui-ci est dissocié en un faisceau de facultés et que ces dernières sont hypostasiées, voir anthropomorphisées. Afin de détruire cette illusion, il nous faut insister sur l'unité de l'homme. C'est au fond l'homme tout entier qui connaît, qui veut, qui devient bon ou mauvais moyennant tel ou tel usage de ses facultés. *Actiones sunt suppositorum* disaient les anciens." *Op. cit.*, pp. 231-232.
15. Jacques Maritain, *Three Reformers: Luther, Descartes, Rousseau* (London, 1950) p. 57.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
18. Malebranche in *De la recherche de la vérité* elaborates on Descartes' remarks on the will and judgment by drawing a parallel between the realm of knowledge where judgment is suspended and the realm of ethics where consent is suspended. But for all intents and purposes, there is no real distinction between assent and consent. "Cependant la plupart des philosophes prétendent que ces jugements même que formons sur des choses obscures ne sont pas volontaires, et ils veulent généralement que le consentement à la vérité soit une

action de l'entendement, ce qu'ils appellent acquiescement, *assensus*, à la différence du consentement au bien qu'ils attribuent à la volonté et qu'ils appellent consentement, *consensus*. Mais voici la cause de leur distinction et de leur erreur. *De la recherche de la vérité* (Paris, 1945) I, p. 9. See Henri Gouhier, *Malebranche* (Paris, 1929) pp. 146-151. I do distinguish between assent and consent in this paper, when it concerns the Thomistic position. John Henry Newman said that "an assertion is the expression of an act of assent." *An Essay in aid of A Grammar of Assent* (London, 1939) p. 5.

19. Jacques Maritain, *The Dream of Descartes*, transl. Mabelle L. Adison (New York, 1944) p. 46. I have replaced the word "speculative" by "theoretical". Maritain refers to Gilson's *La liberté chez Descartes et la théologie* (Paris, 1913) p. 441.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
22. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Cartesian Freedom", *Literary and Philosophical Essays* (London, 1955) pp. 169-184.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 170.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 171.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 179.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*, p. 174.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 181.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 184.
31. *Ibid.*
32. "Nor does Sartre's use of 'freedom' resemble its development in Heidegger's *On the Essence of Ground*, where it is a central concept. On the contrary, Heidegger has there begun to make more explicit the rooting of human being in Being. In this case, through an identification of freedom and 'ground', a relation which, though already present in *Sein und Zeit*, has come more and more to dominate much of his later work. Such a conception of being Sartre would certainly reject." Marjorie Grene, *Sartre* (New York, 1973) p. 65. To be precise, the statement in Heidegger is: "Die Freiheit ist der Grund des Grundes." *Von Wesen des Grundes* (Frankfurt am Main, 1955) p. 53. So it is an inference to replace "ground" by "being".
33. Jacques Maritain, *Neuf leçons sur les notions premières de la philosophie morale* (Paris, 1951) pp. 41-42.
34. Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, p. 48.
35. Jean-Paul Sartre, *op. cit.*, p. 177.
36. Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, p. 90.
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*, pp. 91-92.
39. R. A. Gauthier, *La morale d'Aristote* (Paris, 1963) p. 29.