

PART TWO

EXISTENCE AND THE EXISTENT

E. The Free Existent and the Free Eternal Purposes

MAKING SOMETHING OUT OF NIHILATION

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Jacques Maritain solved the problem of predestination. He considered the solution to that problem his most important contribution.¹ We should consider it one of the great intellectual achievements of all time. For it is literally true that nothing can solve the problem of predestination. Yet Maritain solved it by recognizing that nothing, or more precisely, nihilation, the making of nothingness, *can* solve it. This study will attempt to enhance our understanding of nihilation by relating it to the following concepts: freedom of exercise, the role of intellectual consideration in choice, the external causes of free acts, the will's determination by the universal idea of goodness, and God's freedom.

For the purposes of this study, I abstract from all aspects of the problem of predestination but the following: how can human evil be the result of our freedom if we are created by an all-powerful God? The causality of the creator must extend to every detail of His creation. If there is anything in our decisions of which God's free choice is not the primary cause, God is not God. That is true of evil decisions as well as good; every detail in an evil human decision is there only as a result of God's causally prior decision. Therefore, why is it not God's will rather than ours that is responsible for evil?

1. Freedom of Exercise

As Maritain shows, the solution to the problem of predestination comes from Aquinas's doctrine of freedom of exercise.² Although the term "nihilate" is Maritain's, it expresses Aquinas's doctrine that the will is free not to act as well as to act. The will's act is a response to an attraction offered by a perceived object. If we are unable to refrain from responding to the attraction offered by some object, we are not free with respect to choosing that object. Therefore, to be free with respect to choosing A or choosing B (freedom of specification), we must be able to act or not act (freedom of exercise) with respect to choosing A and act or not act with respect to choosing B. Freedom of specification is freedom of exercise in series. We are not free to choose one from among incompatible possibilities unless we are free to refrain from choosing each of the others.³

In *De Malo*, Aquinas traces moral evil to our ability not to act, freedom of exercise.⁴ Through not acting, we become the cause of an absence, a lack, in our decision-making process. From that absence comes a morally vitiated decision. To solve the problem of predestination, Maritain simply drew the next logical conclusion from Aquinas's position. God is the primary cause of everything that exists positively in an action. But a decision is not evil because of what exists positively in it. It is evil because of what is absent from it. We cause absence by not acting rather than by acting. Since moral evil derives from our not acting, our ability to cause moral evil neither limits God's causality nor makes Him the cause of moral evil.

Many have discussed freedom of exercise, but only Maritain has seen there the solution to the problem of predestination. Perhaps the reason is that we tend to think of freedom of exercise in terms of sins of omission. But, if the inaction explaining moral evil were confined to sins of omission, no other sins would be possible. Aquinas, however, explicitly includes within freedom of exercise the intellectual non-consideration of the moral rule that vitiates the decision, or the omission of a decision, and the external action, or the omission of an external action, commanded by the decision.⁵

2. Intellectual Consideration and Non-consideration

As Maritain notes, by positing a voluntary absence of intellectual consideration prior to the absence that constitutes moral evil proper, Aquinas brilliantly avoids the vicious circle of explaining moral evil by moral evil.⁶ But the theory of consideration and non-consideration is more than a device constructed merely to escape from a dilemma.

As rational beings, we direct our actions by our awareness of their ends and of the relation of means to the ends. Unless I am sleepwalking or hypnotized, when I eat an ice cream cone, I do so because I am seeking a kind of pleasure that I am aware of and because I am aware of the customary relation between the eating of ice cream and the experience of that pleasure. But in addition to being aware of the pleasure that comes from ice cream, I am aware of the calories and cholesterol ice cream contains, and I am aware of the unhealthy consequences calories and cholesterol can have. If I choose to eat the ice cream, I am letting my awareness of its pleasure provide the goal toward which I consciously direct my behavior. Conversely, I do not let my awareness of the healthy effects of avoiding excessive calories and cholesterol provide my goal.

My awareness of the ice cream's pleasure is cognitional; my choice of the ice cream is volitional. But, in producing the choice, I will to use my knowledge of the pleasure to provide the goal at which the choice aims. The will causes the intellect to hold the pleasure in attention so that the decision may have a target. Without an intellectually grasped target, the decision would be blind. Hence, when we choose, the will must cause the intellect to hold an object in consideration; otherwise, the intellect would

determine the will, and we would not be free. But willing the existence of consideration of an object is not enough, we must also will the existence of the object. These are the two phases of the will's act found in Aquinas by Maritain.

In order for my behavior to be moral, I must direct my behavior by my awareness of its moral significance. This is what Aquinas means by the consideration or non-consideration of the rule. Good deeds done unconsciously or accidentally do not constitute morally good decisions. If my stepping into the ice cream shop prevents a robbery, I am not morally responsible unless I did it with that end in view. Hence, Aquinas's theory is in complete agreement with human experience. The knowledge that provides the conscious goal of our behavior can be our awareness of what is moral, or, even though we are aware of the demands of morality, the conscious goal of our behavior can be provided by our knowledge of the satisfaction we might get from an immoral act. Everything depends on which part of our knowledge we use to direct ourselves toward a goal. But to the extent that we have rational control of ourselves, we will let some part of our knowledge set the goal of our behavior.

As unfamiliar as "the consideration or non-consideration of the rule" might sound, we express the same idea whenever we describe actions as "thoughtless" or "in-considerate," or whenever we use phrases like "All you think about is . . ." or "What is uppermost in your mind is . . .". In accusing someone of being thoughtless, we do not imply that he lacks knowledge of whatever it is he should be thinking of; we imply the opposite. We are criticizing him as a being who consciously directs action by awareness of the objects of action, and we are accusing him of not thinking of what he should be and, hence, could be thinking of, where "thinking of" refers to using awareness of some value to set the goal of action. Likewise, an inconsiderate person is aware of the rights of others but acts without using the consideration of those rights, consideration of the *rule*, to set the goal of his action. He directs his action toward an end by his awareness of something else and in so doing allows that other thing to be what is uppermost in his mind.

Still, mere non-consideration of something does not constitute moral evil. Moral evil is constituted by disordered decisions concerning the existence of the objects of intellectual consideration, decisions disordered because we make them without holding moral values in consideration as their targets.⁷

3. The Cause of the Will's Transition from Potency to Act

The source of moral evil, then, is non-acting with respect to the consideration of what is morally right as we make decisions directing ourselves toward goals. This is what Maritain calls nihilation. We can learn more about nihilation by using it to solve another problem, just as Maritain used it to solve the problem of predestination.

The problem of predestination concerns the relation between our freedom and divine causality. But there is another more widely known problem of freedom with respect to any kind of efficient causality at all. If a choice is caused, it must be accounted for by the fact that its causes, whether creative or not, are what they are. Causes act because their natures orient them to their actions. If the nature of a cause makes it sufficient to produce an effect, must not the effect be necessitated by the cause's orientation to this action? For, if the cause can be what it is without producing the effect, the cause seems insufficient for the effect, and the cause is not the cause after all. Let us call this the *general* problem of causality and freedom and call the problem of predestination the *special* problem of causality and freedom.

Aquinas's solution to the general problem is that the will is given its specifying object by the universal idea of goodness. Hence, the will would be necessitated by an infinite good and for that very reason is not necessitated by finite goods. When we choose a finite good, it can only be the will itself that bestows efficacious attractiveness on that good.

However, standard presentations of Aquinas's solution to the general problem, while entirely correct as far as they go, do not go far enough. They leave unanswered a question for which nihilation provides the answer. Aquinas says:

Everything that is at one time an agent actually, and at another time an agent potentially, needs to be moved by another. Now it is evident that the will begins to will something which previously it did not will. Therefore it must, of necessity, be moved by something to will it.⁸

But that puts us right back at the general problem. Whatever moves the will to act must do so by being what it is. What the cause is must therefore be sufficient to move the will to act, but it seems that the cause would not be sufficient if the will's act did not follow necessarily from the cause's being what it is.

The concept of nihilation solves this aspect of the general problem. *Non-acting with respect to some object does not require any new causality.* In the words of Aquinas, "it is not necessary to seek any cause for this not making use of the rule, because the very freedom of the will to act or not act is sufficient for not making use of the rule."⁹ To produce a decision, the choice, say, of A, is to cause a new state of affairs to exist. But we are able to prefer the state of affairs already existing when we are not choosing A. Preferring the state of affairs that already exists means letting something that already exists remain as it is without producing a new decision. And since leaving things as they are does not introduce any new reality, no new causality is called for. When we do not choose A, we may choose B. If we

produce the choice of B, we do not let something that already exists remain as it is. But we are just as free not to choose B, and thus leave things as they are by not acting, as we are free not to choose A.

When we act rather than not act, on the other hand, causality is called for. What is it that causes the will to go from not acting to acting? Aquinas's answer is that only the will's maker, God, can cause voluntary movement in the will, because the movement of the will is, like a natural movement, from within.¹⁰ But, since this argument also applies to nonfree natural actions, it does not specifically tell us how a free act is caused, nor does it tell us how God may use secondary causes in the process. The only possible answer to these questions is that God produces the will's act by causing the intellect to present the will with an object that, in turn, causes an attraction in the will toward that object. The will's act is a response to the ontological perfection seen in the intellect's object. Therefore, the will's act is caused by an attraction produced by the cognition of that ontological perfection.

This answer is perfectly consistent with Aquinas¹¹ and with Maritain's description of the "shatterable activations" by which God inclines the will toward good. We should understand the distinction between shatterable and unshatterable activations as we do the distinction between God's intellect and will, His powers and their acts, and all the other distinctions of reason we use in speaking of God. The use of these distinctions does not assert any real multiplicity or potentiality of God's nature. These distinctions derive from the diverse realities that provide the means by which we conceptualize God, not from that which is conceptualized.

To begin with, a divine activation is not some *tertium quid* standing between God and His effects. Nothing stands between God and His effects. The term "activation" simply expresses the causal dependency of effects on the divine agent. Secondly and crucially, calling the causal relation "shatterable" in no way implies that this divine causality fails to produce an effect that is fully actual and existential. Maritain is explicit on this point. In an important passage, in which he corrects a footnote in *Existence and the Existent*, Maritain explains the effects attributable to shatterable activations:

I am speaking of psychological realities more and more recognized today, and which can depend in us on anything at all, on a truth grasped by the mind, on a prudential consideration, on a natural or supernatural inspiration, on any sort of weighing or tugging on the will, on a love, a desire, on an allurements, nay even on a pressure from the unconscious, or even on some advice received, on an example, on some reading, etc. All these things can elicit under the divine action a movement or a tendency determined toward the good, toward this or that good

option to be made. And the *movement or tendency in question toward the good* . . . which the action of God causes to be born in us from any one of the above-mentioned occurrences--this is the *effect* produced in the soul by the shatterable motion.¹²

There is nothing mysterious or occult about the operation of shatterable activations. God can cause a tendency to a good act in the will by causing such mundane events as grasping a truth, receiving advice, or observing an example.

If there is anything mysterious about shatterable activations, it might be why they are called "shatterable." As we have seen, the effects of these activations are as actual, as existential, as are any of God's effects. God's causality is not shattered. However, the tendency toward choice that God produces does not necessitate the choice. Since the choice may fail to come into existence, God's causality is describable as shatterable, not in itself or with respect to its immediate effect, but by conceptually relating it to something other than itself which is its final goal. By referring effects of God to something other than themselves, we construct a conceptual distinction enabling us to express two ways in which God's effects are related to this final goal, namely, shatterably and unshatterably. But this distinction in no way asserts a duality of the nature of God, of the actuality of His effects, or of His effects' dependence on Him.

We were asking what causes the will to go from not acting to acting. The answer that intellectual apprehension of a good causes a tendency toward act in the will might appear to be inconsistent with Maritain's analysis of the effects of shatterable activations. Intellectual apprehension covers Maritain's examples such as a prudential consideration or receiving advice, but what about the examples of "a love, a desire, an allurements, nay even a pressure from the unconscious"? The latter pertain to appetite, not knowledge; to the subjective order, not the objective.

The inconsistency is only apparent. The role of subjective dispositions in the production of an appetite's act is to enable the cognition of an object to cause an attraction in the appetite. The subjective dispositions are conditions for the cognition's causing of the attraction, but it is the cognition that is the proximate cause of the attraction.

Aesthetic enjoyment is the most subjectively conditioned of events. If aesthetic enjoyment must be analysed as a response caused by the cognition of an object's intrinsic qualities, a similar analysis is *a fortiori* due acts of the will, the rational appetite. Assume a drug is found that causes us to like a kind of music we would not like otherwise. Does this not show the subjectivity of aesthetic evaluation? That evaluations depend on the abilities and dispositions of the evaluating subject is not in doubt. But what the drug has done is to so modify our dispositions that we estimate a certain cognized

set of intrinsic characteristics, those of the music, in a way we did not before. In other words, as a result of the drug, the intrinsic pattern of the sounds now *causes* a different reaction than it did before. But it is that intrinsic pattern that is the proximate cause and object of this reaction. The reaction itself is an esteeming of the sounds for their intrinsic qualities.¹³

Likewise, choices are caused through attractions produced in the will by our awareness of good objects. Not everyone will experience an attraction to the ontological perfection recognized in A or B. If we are to value something for its intrinsic qualities, our faculties may have to be in a certain subjective condition. But, for those whose faculties are in the proper condition, it is the awareness of the perfection in A or B that causes the attraction and hence moves the will to act.

4. The Positively Based Power of Nihilating

We examined shatterable activations to see what the sufficient cause of the will's act is. But can it be possible for us not to act if the cause of an act, namely, our awareness of the perfection at which the act aims, is sufficient to produce the act? If we do not act, it seems that the cause is not sufficient to produce the act. If it is not sufficient and yet we act, the change from not acting to acting does not have an explanation. In other words, it seems that the general problem is still with us. How does nihilation permit an act with sufficient causes to be free?

Why is it necessary that a cause produce a particular effect and no other? Because the cause's orientation to action is its nature, and its nature is concrete and particular, since whatever exists is concrete and particular. As the rational appetite, the will is attracted to goals according to the intellect's awareness of its objects, and the objects of the intellect are universal. By hypothesis, therefore, the will's orientation to behavior is characterized by universality, not particularity. As abstracted from individuals, the universal idea of goodness cannot direct us to prefer this or that individual which instantiates the idea, except for an infinitely good individual, but does direct us to find *some* instantiation to prefer.¹⁴ Confronted with incompatible forms of finite goodness, we must prefer some form of finite goodness, but not necessarily this or that form. Therefore, the will's nature makes us able to respond to finite goodness but, since we are only necessitated to prefer *some* finite goodness, we can also non-act with respect to any finite goodness and prefer the already existing state of affairs instead. When we act, we allow the value perceived in the finite good to draw forth the choice by which we prefer it. Our awareness of the ontological goodness of the finite object is sufficient to cause this response, but only if we do not take the option of not acting.

As an intellectual appetite, the will may sound like a strange bird, a power of the abstract and general, a power of the undefined. On the contrary, since we are determined to seek some form of finite goodness, but not this or that form, when the will is presented with a course of action, we

are required to either prefer to undertake that course of action or prefer not to undertake it. The will is so necessitated that we cannot avoid making one or the other our preference.

Confronted with a possible course of action A, how do we go about preferring to undertake A? By exercising our power of choice. How do we go about preferring not to undertake A? By not exercising our power of choice. We are tempted to ask: "How do I go about exercising or not exercising my power of choice? What must I do to succeed in exercising it or not exercising it?" These questions look for some other act preceding the act by which we prefer to undertake A or the refraining from acting by which we prefer not to undertake A. The questions incorrectly assume that some further causal factor of the refraining from acting by which we prefer not to undertake A. The questions incorrectly assume that some further causal factor is needed to explain the will's action or inaction. But the attraction for A, caused by our awareness of A, is sufficient to cause the exercise of the will's power to act. And the attraction for the situation that already exists, caused by our awareness of that situation, is sufficient to allow us not to exercise the will's power to act. No other cause can be needed by an appetite whose specifying object directs it to select some apprehended good while excluding determination by any particular one.¹⁵

Seeking some previous act focuses on the will's interior makeup. But the will is a relation to objects other than itself, here course of action A, on the one hand, and the state that already exists without A, on the other. The proper way to examine the will's makeup is to ask about its relation to what is other than itself: how does it bring about our preference for A or our preference for the status quo? The answer is by its action or inaction. That is, the answer describes how the will relates or does not relate to an object other than itself. If there were any other answer, the will would not be a power of relating to objects other than itself. We can learn more about the will's nature, but only by always framing our questions, and their answers, in terms of the will's possible ways of relating to its objects. We must either prefer A or not prefer A. We do so by exercising our power to act or not exercising it. In exercising our power to act, we have preferred to undertake A; in not exercising it, we have preferred not to undertake A.

When we examine that power further, we find that the causal explanation of our preference does not require some preceding act of the will but only our consciousness of the perfection to be aimed at through A and our consciousness of the perfection that already exists before A has been chosen. That consciousness renders our not acting a positive, intentional preference for a state of affairs that does not include A, rather than a mere absence of the preference for A. It is entirely true that, in itself, the non-consideration of the perfection to be accomplished through A is a mere absence. But we are not here looking at that non-consideration just in itself. We are looking at it in relation to (1) the necessity of our either preferring A

or not preferring A and (2) the fact that we are aware of what not preferring A means. By consciously not acting under these conditions, we put ourselves in a state of satisfaction with our existing state, at least as compared to the state we would have been in had we chosen A.

Contrast the will's inaction to inaction in the case of determined causes. If my battery is dead, my car does not start. Here, the inaction reflects the absence of sufficient causes. Nihilation, on the other hand, reflects a positively based *power* of not acting. Our power to choose is also the power not to choose. Unlike the car not starting, nihilation requires a positively based power of not acting precisely because there are sufficient causes for the will's act if we do not intentionally non-act.¹⁶ Nihilation in itself is something merely negative. But nihilation can occur because of the supremely positive ontological context in which decisions take place. The context is that of an intelligence aware of a potentially existing good that attracts it, a good whose realization requires a choice. Such an intelligence must also be aware of the good that already exists in the situation, a situation that will cease to exist if a new choice is made. The intelligence's appetite cannot avoid a preference for one of those two situations. But because its nature is determined *ad unum* only by the universal idea of goodness, the intelligence's appetite is not determined to one or the other. To prefer one or the other amounts to acting or not acting. Either acting or not acting is based on the prior positive awareness of the object that is thus made the preference. Freedom derives from the will's roots in the intellect's grasp of being.

5. God's Freedom

The role of nihilation in freedom is by no means confined to cases in which evil, or even a lesser good, is a possibility. In fact, the freedom of God Himself requires a positively based power of the negative. Why was God free in creating us? Because He could have refrained from creating us by not acting. Why would God not have been different had he not decided to create? Because that would have been a non-act adding nothing to the divine reality.¹⁷ Then why did God not change in freely deciding to create? Because the new act resulting from His not non-acting exists entirely outside of Him. If we look for something new in His not non-acting that corresponds to the decision that newly exists in us when we do not non-act, we, God's creatures, are all that is new. From this perspective, we *are* God's decision. That is how close God is to us and we to God.¹⁸

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NOTES

1. See J. Maritain, *God and the Permission of Evil*, transl. J. Evans (Milwaukee, 1966) p. viii.
2. See J. Maritain, *St. Thomas and the Problem of Evil*, transl. Mrs. G. Andison (Milwaukee, 1942) pp. 20-46.
3. For this point, I am indebted to J. Sikora, *Inquiry into Being* (Chicago, 1965) p. 255. Sikora's book has a lengthy discussion of divine and human freedom based on Maritain; see pp. 254-256 and 264-276.
4. *De Malo*, I, 3.
5. In addition to *De Malo*, I, 3, see *Summa Theol.*, I-II, 6, 3, where Aquinas asks whether there can be voluntariness without any act, the kind of voluntariness involved in freedom of exercise. The third objection states that, since knowledge is essential to voluntariness and knowledge requires an act, voluntariness requires an act. Aquinas replies that voluntariness requires the power to consider as it requires the power to will and to act but, just as it is voluntary not to will and not to act, when it is time to do so, it is also voluntary not to consider. This reply does not state whether voluntary inaction with respect to consideration extends to the non-consideration of the moral rule from which moral evil results, but in *De Malo*, I, 3, Aquinas makes that point explicitly.
6. See *St. Thomas and the Problem of Evil*, pp. 20-31; *God and Permission*, pp. 21-25, 34-36, 44-54; J. Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, transl. L. Galantiere and G. Phelan (New York, 1948) pp. 89-92.
7. On this point, see the places cited in notes 4 and 6 as well as Aquinas, *Sum. cont. Gent.*, III, 10.
8. *Summa Theol.*, I-II, 9, 4; translation, *Basic Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. A. Pegis (New York, 1945) II, 254.
9. *De Malo*, I, 3; my translation.
10. *Summa Theol.*, I-II, 9, 6.
11. See, for example, *Summa Theol.*, I-II, 9, 6 ad 2; I, 80, 2.
12. *God and Permission*, pp. 56-57. The footnote corrected in *Existence and the Existent* is note 9 of chapter 4, pp. 94-99.
13. That the intrinsic characteristics may be those of sounds having only phenomenal existence is not at issue here. If the existence of sounds is subjective, this is a different subjective existence from that of the evaluation. For, by hypothesis, the same sounds can be evaluated differently.
14. For a new analysis of the way transcendental ideas abstract from their inferiors, see John C. Cahalan, *Causal Realism: An Essay on Philosophical Method and the Foundations of Knowledge* (Lanham, Maryland, 1985) pp. 421-434. Pp. 477-483 of that work discuss freedom with respect to causality and not acting.
15. Confronted by a bone, a dog cannot avoid either preferring to get the bone or preferring the state it is in without the bone. But if the dog does not prefer to get the bone, the inaction results from the insufficient attractiveness of the bone. The inaction does not result from a power of not responding to a bone whose attractiveness is sufficient to cause the dog to prefer it. On the question of the sufficient reason for our freely choosing one thing rather than another, see Cahalan, *Causal Realism*, p. 483.
16. *Summa Theol.*, I-II, 10, 2 ad 2 implies that the only sufficient cause of the will's act is the infinite good that would necessitate the act. Aquinas is speaking there of an unconditionally sufficient cause. The tendency elicited by cognition of a finite good is a sufficient cause in the conditional sense that it is the tendency that causes us to act, and

hence is sufficient to cause us to act, if we do not intentionally non-act. To act is to allow the tendency to cause the consideration that leads to the choice. Not to act is to allow the attraction for what already exists to prevent that consideration.

17. I owe this point to Sikora, *Inquiry*, p. 255.
18. With reference to the spiritual life, we can say that good acts result from our simply allowing grace to work or from our not doing anything to interfere with grace. This appears to contradict Maritain by making us inactive with respect to good and active with respect to evil. The appearance of contradiction comes from the difference between the speculative vocabulary of Maritain's analysis of freedom and the practical vocabulary of this description of our role in the spiritual life. The practical point of view is the point of view of our first initiative. We act when we do good, but it is grace that causes our act, if we do not take the initiative of not acting. We non-act when we interfere with grace but, in doing so, we take the first initiative of evil. The analysis of the differences between speculative and practical vocabulary is one of the many neglected but essential contributions of Maritain. See J. Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, transl. G. Phelan (New York, 1959) pp. 311-319, 326-338.