

EXISTENTIAL REALISM AND FREEDOM OF CHOICE

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Contrary to what Sartre and some other contemporary existentialists want to believe, Maritain insists that while only natures can have being, having a nature does not deprive man of his freedom. Sartre reminds Maritain of Descartes who held that God could have created mountains without valleys, square circles, and contradictions both of which were equally true. In Sartre's version, this sort of "freedom of choice," in the absence of God, belongs to man. Thus we may say that while Descartes endows God with the most radical kind of Sartrean existentialist freedom, what Sartre wishes for is god-like power, *à la* Descartes, for man. And why do they do this? Most likely because along with many other philosophers, both ancient and modern, they want desperately to make sure that Being is not imprisoned in Necessity. Thus Descartes is afraid that, if God's creation and rule of the world were in any way rationally determined, He would not be "free." And Sartre fears the same for man just in case there was a God. In *Existence and the Existent*, Maritain claims that Thomist existential realism has a sound philosophical as well as a theological solution to this age-old problem, and anyone who has studied this slim but rich volume cannot but be impressed by both its scope and its intensity.

Condensed in those relatively few pages, we not only find a solid exposition of a realist existential metaphysics, epistemology, and theory of ethics, including an ontological definition of the person; despite his disclaimers, Maritain's discussion also reaches deeply into the mysteries of the Christian faith, among which the problem of evil in the world is certainly not the least puzzling. This short treatise is thus but another brilliant example of Maritain's passion and talent for "distinguishing in order to unite," and in fact we find in it repeated references to at least ten of his other major works, from *Science et sagesse* and *Frontières de la poésie* to *La Personne et le bien commun* and *De la Philosophie chrétienne*, as well as his majestic *Les Degrés du savoir*.

Add to this the inimitable Maritain style--which contrasts "the treasures of the intelligibility of being" in Thomist philosophy with "transcendental

embezzlement" perpetrated by contemporary existentialism, and notes further that "Herr Heidegger is not lacking in the gift of opportunism," that it is far more comfortable "to excogitate anguish than to suffer it," and that there would be no saints if the Kantian moral imperative, to act so that the maxim of one's act could be a law for all humanity, were valid--add the style to the content, and you have here a work that for the serious students of Maritain is a joy to read and an inexhaustible source of insight and inspiration. Yet this may not be so for the uninitiated casual readers, for whom Maritain's brilliance and passion may actually prove obstacles to the understanding of his theses. And while this is not fatal to Maritain's genius, it does not always help his cause, which in this case is the philosophical defense of one particular principle of Christian existentialism, namely, the reality of human freedom under divine Providence. Thus even as I assume that Maritain interprets St. Thomas correctly on all the topics treated in *Existence and the Existent*, I find his exposition too involved for an audience of non-specialists. But rather than to try to simplify Maritain, which would be a shame even if it were possible, what I propose in this paper is to take a look at what two other contemporary Thomists, Josef Pieper and Yves R. Simon, have to say about the reality and intelligibility of our existence in which, while remaining entirely under divine control, we retain freedom of choice. In my view, their contributions may help even those who know Maritain to understand him better.

I

Only a few years after the publication of Maritain's *Existence and the Existent*, Josef Pieper wrote an article on "The Negative Element in the Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas" in which, without ever mentioning Maritain, he in effect presented his own version of existential realism. While in substantial agreement with Maritain's exposition, this brief essay still sheds new light on it by its wonderfully clear treatment of the concept of creation.

According to Pieper, underlying the whole of the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas is the assumption that nothing exists which is not *creatura*, except the Creator Himself, and that this createdness is what determines the inner structure of things.¹ This is what Aquinas takes for granted when he says that "all that exists is good," or that "all that exists is true." Philosophers who conceive of existence as composed of a neutral world of objects fail to understand that rather than in some sort of secondary qualities, things are good and true in their very existence, precisely because they are created, because they come from the "eye of God," as, Pieper recalls, the ancient Egyptians used to say.² The idea of creation, in other words, makes a decisive difference in how we look at the world. In fact, only creation makes the world both real, "good," and intelligible, "true," even as it remains itself wrapped in mystery. And no one has explained all this better than Aquinas.

Pieper holds that Aquinas would readily agree with modern philosophers from Bacon to Kant that in the strict and proper sense truth can be predicated not of what exists but only of what is thought. But he would then quickly remind them also that real things *are* something thought. Things exist precisely *because* they are *creatively* thought by God and, because they thus have the "character of the word" (as Romano Guardini put it), they may legitimately be called true.³ The essence of things is that they are creatively thought, and nothing exists therefore that does not have a "nature." Here Pieper finds that Aquinas would agree even with Sartre, since they both hold that things can have an essential nature only insofar as they are fashioned by thought. For instance, Sartre concedes that a letter opener has a "nature," because it was invented by man; but he denies that man has a nature, because "there exists no God to think it creatively."⁴ For Aquinas, on the contrary, the very fact that "a creature has its special and finite substance shows that it comes from a principle."⁵ This is why the existentialism of St. Thomas is called "realist." As Maritain never tires of pointing out, existential realism is nothing if not grounded in "the intellectual intuition of being."⁶

"*Res naturalis*," Pieper quotes Aquinas, "*inter duos intellectus constituta [est]*," that is, "a natural thing is placed between two knowing subjects."⁷ As Pieper explains it, by thus placing things between "the absolutely creative knowledge of God and the non-creative, reality-conformed knowledge of man," and using the qualitative sense of *mensura* as something on the one hand given and on the other received, Aquinas is able to set up the whole structure of reality as follows. *Mensurans non mensuratum* is God's creative knowledge which gives measure but receives none. *Mensuratum et mensurans* is the created, natural reality, which is both measured and gives measure--to human knowledge, which is, in this context, *mensuratum non mensurans*, that is, strictly determined by the object of knowledge.⁸ And what all this really means is, simply, that we can indeed know "the truth of things," but only if we recognize them as *creatura*, as creatively thought by God.

Being created, or fashioned by divine thought, however, things have reality and truth not only for us but also for themselves.⁹ St. Augustine put this well, when he said that we see things because they exist, but that they exist because God sees them. And while we thus know that "things are true," we do not and cannot know them exhaustively. The mystery of creation remains and must remain for us a mystery, not only because our intellect is far from perfect but also because, as creatively thought by God, the nature of things is inexhaustible. Pieper makes this point effectively by saying that we fall short in our knowledge of reality precisely because in itself that reality is *all too knowable*. Thus according to St. Thomas, while there is obscurity in things, because they come from nothing--*creatura est tenebra in quantum est ex nihilo*,¹⁰--their reality is light itself--*ipsa actualitas*

rei est quoddam lumen ipsius.¹¹ In short, there is a single reason why things not only exist but are also both knowable and unfathomable, and that reason is their createdness.¹²

Turning now to our main topic, let us ask how this structure of created reality underlying existential realism can accommodate the privileged position of Maritain's "free existent." In the Thomist scheme, human nature, like all things created, is placed between two intellects, God's and our own, which means--*mensuratum et measurans*--that what we know about it is for real. Thus regardless of how it is explained, the constant need to decide what to do, whether accompanied by levity or agony, is the primary human existential reality. This sense of necessary self-involvement and, indeed, creative power is comparable to what we experience when we make things, say, a letter opener. Even though both these kinds of activities are subject to laws, moral in one case, physical in the other, they are free in the sense that they are our own. Honest people attest to this truth every time they accept blame for failures which all too often attend efforts in both the practical and the productive order.¹³

But acting as free existents and knowing ourselves, as Maritain explains, both as objects and subjects, does not necessarily entail that we know ourselves, or our capacity for freedom, exactly the way God does Who created us. The intuition of subjectivity, Maritain writes, surrenders no essence to us: "We know *that which* we are by our phenomena, our operations, our flow of consciousness," but precisely the more we thus know ourselves, "the more, also, we feel that it leaves us ignorant of the essence of our self."¹⁴ But if subjectivity *as subjectivity*, in Maritain's terms, is "inconceptualisable," is not the same necessarily true of our freedom of choice as such, *as freedom of choice*, as it is creatively thought by God? Created "free existents," we are able, in contrast with the rest of nature, to do something about our existence by measuring it out, so to speak, in actions (and in a different sense, in productions) of our own. But that does not mean that this clearly perceived ability of ours to do so is in itself any less unfathomable, because all too knowable, as Aquinas held, than the rest of God's creation. Our freedom, in other words, is in the last analysis a mystery, and we miss something of its objective nature if we do not recognize it as such.

Because this last remark may sound agnostic, I turn again to Pieper who has a convincing explanation of how what he calls "the negative element" in the philosophy of Aquinas in no way undermines its existential realism grounded in the intelligibility, or the "truth," of things. St. Thomas insists not only that we do not know God (we know Him only as *unknown, tamquam ignotum*) but also that we do not even know things in their essence.¹⁵ Indeed, Pieper adds, Lao-Tse's saying that "That name which can be pronounced is not the Eternal Name" applies not only to God but to things as well. But Pieper also reminds us that Aquinas insisted with equal

firmness that the mind does make its way to the essence of things--*intellectus . . . penetrat ad usque rei essentiam*,¹⁶ and that these statements are not necessarily contradictory. For Pieper, the positive and the "negative" elements in the philosophy of St. Thomas are perfectly reconciled in his account of creation. In so far as they are creatively thought by God, he writes, things "possess these two properties: on the one hand their ontological clarity and self-revelation and, on the other hand, their inexhaustibility; their knowability as well as their 'unknowability.'"¹⁷

Mystery thus remains, but we know it for what it is. And Pieper concludes with a message that is quite similar to what I believe Maritain wanted to convey in the poetical and mystical flourishes of his last chapter, "Ecce in Pace." Maritain contends there that even though philosophy is and should always be an autonomous intellectual discipline, all honest philosophy "tends to go beyond itself in order to attain to the silence of unity, where it will harvest all that it knows in a purer and more transparent light."¹⁸ For his part, Pieper too presents the knowing subject as a *viator*, as someone "on the way," and reflects faithfully Maritain's sentiments in his concluding section, which he entitles "Hope as the Structure of Creaturely Knowledge."¹⁹ Aristotle had compared human intelligence to the eyesight of bats dazzled by sunlight. St. Thomas, while not disagreeing, offered however another possibility: though the eyes of the bat do not avail to behold the sun, he commented, it is clearly seen by the eye of the eagle.²⁰

II

While few would associate the general philosophy of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon with that of Jean-Paul Sartre, when it comes to thinking about God and man's freedom of choice, their positions are not so different. For even though Proudhon equivocates about the existence of God, he is as convinced as Sartre that human liberty is incompatible with the idea of a transcendent Providence. This leaves Proudhon no other alternative except to reject submission to any Supreme Being in the name of true morality. Indeed, topping anything that Sartre has written on the subject, Proudhon, stung by a casual slur on his personal integrity, expounds his views in no less than 1,700 closely argued as well as highly emotional pages. "It is a doctrine held by saints," he writes, "that damnation should be preferred to sin if, supposing the impossible, God should impose such an option Religion and morality made siblings by popular consent are in fact heterogenous and incompatible. Today one has to choose between the fear of god and the fear of evil, between the risk of damnation and the risk of improbity--such is my thesis."²¹ In terms current before the advent of existentialism, the battle line is here drawn between transcendence and immanence, as these notions are applied to human destiny. As Proudhon saw it, if this destiny is found in something that transcends the human person, religion is the answer. But if its meaning lies in the human person, any transcendent religion is plainly immoral.

Even today this is not an uncommon view, and some believe that choosing between these alternatives is ultimately an act of faith. But Yves R. Simon holds not only that there is a third choice but also that the way out of Proudhon's dilemma may be opened by a philosophical as distinguished from a theological argument.²² What give Proudhon's thesis a certain plausibility, according to Simon, are various interpretations of divine transcendence found in Cartesianism, Jansenism, fideism, and sometimes even in statements by the spokesman for the Church. For instance, in the famous dictionary of Bergier, a high prelate remarks that "no purely human reason can establish the distinction between good and evil; if it had not been God's good pleasure to let us know of his intention, a son could kill his father without culpability." When an archbishop says things like that, Simon comments, one cannot expect a mere printer to correct it.²³ But Proudhon remains nevertheless at fault, because he does not bother to consider a different doctrine of transcendence in which God's work is not at odds either with our moral sense or with our freedom of choice.

Simon admits that interpreting transcendence is a task that belongs ultimately to theology. But he believes that philosophy can help, and that the open-minded philosopher's first care is to establish a valid idea of *nature*. Whether things exist or not may be entirely up to God, but if they exist, shouldn't they be true to themselves? If it is God's creative idea that gives them being, what He bestows upon each thing as he draws it from nothingness is precisely the power *to be itself*. In other words, a *nature* is above all a principle of autonomy which is placed so deep in things that it cannot be distinguished from their realization. Nature is thus present in every created being, and it enables even the humblest thing to be itself and to act out the its divine idea on its own.²⁴

Moreover, while to some privileged beings God has given not only nature but also freedom, their case is not substantially different. As created beings they depend on God, but through their nature they depend on Him precisely to be free. By reason of their identity with themselves, free natures no less than other natures are linked to certain determined ends. But in contrast with other natures, free natures are themselves responsible for attaining those ends and are even able to choose other ends that do not lead to their fulfillment. But as Simon has written elsewhere, we must not confuse freedom with our ability to choose between right *and* wrong, good *and* evil. For human beings are truly free only when they are able consistently to choose the true good over the apparent good, as befits rational agents.²⁵ Thus again we see that free natures are not so different from other natures for, as Simon explains, "God remains the total cause of all their activity, even as their freedom--which after all is their nature--enjoys the fulness of reality."²⁶

What Proudhon, and he is not alone, fails to understand is that moral decisions depend no less on the existential circumstances of individual cases,

including personalities, than on general principles of ethics. For him, and others, Cicero's formal statement that natural law is the same in Athens and in Rome is proof enough that any idea of transcendental morality rules out freedom of choice.²⁷ But the true notion of transcendence, as just explained, far from excluding freedom of choice, clearly calls for it and is alone capable of giving it meaning. For if man were a law unto himself, or without nature as Sartre would have it, which amounts to the same thing, man would be like a caricature of the god of Descartes, totally indifferent to all contradictions. That Proudhon does not end with such a divinization of man, is due, according to Simon, to what amounts to an accident, namely, his exclusive commitment to the notion of justice as equality, not only among men but apparently among all things.²⁸

Nevertheless, Simon acknowledges that the idea of a limited autonomy is rather obscure and that not everyone may be equally willing to accept the interpretation of the human condition on the basis of doctrines of creation, fall, and redeeming Incarnation. And to accommodate all who would approach this problem with an open mind, he goes back to Aristotle who actually has a theory that shows how unqualified dependence does not necessarily destroy and may actually promote autonomy.

In contrast to the reaction of ordinary physical things when they are acted upon, our senses, Aristotle points out, respond by being themselves. When acted upon, a physical thing undergoes either transformation, replacement, or destruction. "If the ontological condition of matter could be translated into feelings," Simon writes, "one could say that its joys are never without a cloud, nor its sadness without consolation."²⁹ But there are no substitutions and no losses in sense perception. "It is a case of simple becoming, where our senses do their own thing, so to speak, without having to give up anything in return. In other words, 'being acted upon' in no way affects their autonomy."³⁰ And what goes for sense perception goes *a fortiori* for intellectual perception. The object of knowledge acts upon the knower both as an efficient and as a formal cause-- *mensurans qua mensuratum*, as Aquinas might put it. The knower faced with this object cannot not know it, or know it as something else than it is. And yet, being so determinately acted upon, far from changing the knower in his being or nature, actually enhances his autonomy and makes him be more of what he is, namely, a knower. As an object under the influence of other objects, the soul moves toward its own finalities and completes or perfects itself according to its own law.³¹

For anyone who has problems with transcendence and immanence, this Aristotelian version of what amounts to a realist existentialist epistemology, without the benefit of the notion of creation, should be quite helpful. For here is a case of infinitely strong influence that nevertheless safeguards fully the autonomy of those exposed to it, and the interpretation leaves God out of it. But in direct reply to Proudhon's doubts, and as a suggestion to those

who might share them, Simon submits that the action of the known object on the knowing soul is the best analogy for the influence of God on things. Things are what they are, because God has given them their everything. And in the case of rational natures, this includes their freedom and moral responsibility.

But finally, Simon suggests also another way of thinking about divine transcendence respecting the autonomy of creatures that I find effectively complements Maritain's suggestion that we should think of eternity not as time stretched in opposite directions but rather as an everlasting instant, an enduring "divine today."³² We must not, Simon warns, think of God as a kind of superman busily and jealously controlling everything. Such a despotic model conveys the idea of an absolute power exercised over things, as well as people reduced to mere automatons, without a law, nature, or will of their own. God's power is far greater than that. Every single thing He creates acts by itself and for itself precisely by the power given it with its nature. And what is true of the humblest creature, is true in a distinguished way of creatures who have been given freedom as well as a nature. They may have their freedom in God, but in God *they have it*.³³

III

The concepts of creation and of nature, as explained above by Pieper and Simon respectively, make it easier, in my opinion, to understand the relation between existential realism and freedom of choice. Reduced to its simplest terms, that relation may be stated as follows: what is real and true, including human nature which puts us in charge of our own human, that is, moral existence. This position may be said to take care not only of the absurdities of Sartrean naked existence but also of the Kantian gap between the starry skies above and the moral law within. It represents a unified, realistic, and eminently practical view of the world and the human condition. And it is, of course, also exactly the position that Maritain has consistently expounded in all his works.

In *Existence and the Existent*, however, Maritain, irresistibly drawn as usual to questions of faith, investigates more than just the basic philosophical problems that need to be solved to show that our freedom of choice is not an illusion. To put it crudely, while treating of the problem of evil in the world, he takes it upon himself also to defend God, so to speak, from any complicity in our sins and, in doing so, manages, in my view, to obscure the issues. I have no doubts whatsoever that Maritain fully subscribes to the proposition that while we have our freedom *in* God, in God *we have it*. But virtually the only concrete example of freedom of choice he offers in this book is our ability to "nihilate" what we may call God's true wishes, namely, the tendency to do good that He has built into our nature.³⁴

In fact, while Maritain helps us think about God's eternal plan by suggesting that we think of it not as a scenario prepared in advance but rather as a play forever "improvised under the eternal and immutable

direction of the almighty Stage Manager," he again confuses the reader when he adds that while man cannot alter this eternal plan, "he enters into its very composition and its eternal fixity by his power of saying, No!"³⁵ Consequently, according to Maritain, in the order of nature "the whole world is seated in wickedness", and "the terrible, the incorruptible, divine fair play leaves us to flounder in the mire." And while he balances this conclusion on the very next page by saying that, fortunately, there is also the order of grace, and that for those who serve God there is the certainty that "in spite of everything, they participate in guiding history towards its accomplishment,"³⁶ this is hardly enough, in my view, to convey the idea that acting deliberately "in the line of good," that is, doing God's will rather than nihilating it, is the real proof of our freedom of choice.

Remote ages, Yves R. Simon has written, may find it relevant to know that Maritain was "the philosopher who, in case of conflict, never hesitated to fulfill his calling rather than follow his choice."³⁷ In *Existence and the Existent*, Maritain himself distinguishes between two fundamental postures which he calls *cause-seeking* (essentially philosophical) and *saving my all* (basically religious), even as he refrains from admitting that, fulfilling his calling, he inclines toward the latter.³⁸ Thus as in so many of his other writings, in this "essay in Christian existentialism" he does battle not only with Sartre's atheism but with all sorts of heresies, philosophical as well as religious, and he does get sometimes carried away with polemical zeal. Reacting against the replacement of "moral tragedy by sophisticated metaphysics,"³⁹ Maritain is anxious to establish that evil is "man's invention"⁴⁰ and to alert us against "the swoon of liberty"--which is what sin is.⁴¹ I believe his message comes across, even if we cannot all follow the subtle theological arguments he obviously loved so much.⁴² This is why I thought a little help from some fellow-Thomists may be in order. And if one still does not understand how man can be free under divine Providence, let him be consoled by the "negative element" in Aquinas' thought recalled by Pieper. Yes, our minds are rather imperfect; but the real reason why we know so poorly is that the existent as well as existence are genuinely inexhaustible, super-intelligible divine mysteries.

NOTES

1. J. Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas*, transl. J. Murray and D. O'Connor (New York, 1957), p. 47.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 53; J-P. Sartre, *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme* (Paris, 1946), p. 22.
5. *Summa Theol.*, I, 93, 6.
6. J. Maritain, *Existence and the Existent* (Garden City, NY, 1956), p. 135.
7. *The Silence*, p. 53.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 67; *De Ver.*, V, 2, ad 11.
11. *The Silence*, p. 56; *Liber de Causis*, I, 6.
12. Cf. *Existence*, pp. 43-44: "The very notion of *essentia* signifies a relation to *esse*, which is why we have good grounds for saying that existence is the primary source of intelligibility. But, not being an essence or an intelligible, this primary source of intelligibility has to be a super-intelligible."
13. On the distinction of "practical" from what he calls the "speculative," i. e., theoretical order, see J. Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge* (New York, 1959), Appendix VII; for a general explanation of what is called above "productive order," see J. Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York, 1953).
14. *Existence*, p. 76.
15. *The Silence*, pp. 64-65; *Summa Theol.*, I, 2, ad 1; I, 3, prologue.
16. *The Silence*, p. 68; *Summa Theol.*, I, II, 31, 5.
17. *The Silence*, p. 69.
18. *Existence*, p. 152.
19. *The Silence*, p. 68.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 71; *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, 2, 2 off.
21. *De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Église* (Paris, 1858), p. 3.
22. Y. Simon, "Le Problème de la transcendance et le défi de Proudhon", *Nova et Vetera*, IX (1934), pp. 225-238; transl. C. O'Donnell and V. Kuic, "The Problem of Transcendence and Proudhon's Challenge," *Thought*, LIV (1979), pp. 176-185.
23. "Proudhon's Challenge," p. 183.
24. *Ibid.*, 181.
25. See Y. Simon, *Freedom of Choice*, ed. Peter Wolff (New York, 1969, 1987).
26. "Proudhon's Challenge," p. 182.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

28. *Ibid.*, 179. Simon offers following illustrations from Proudhon's *Correspondence*: "In brief, I reject not only the absolute God of the priests but also the idea of Man- God." "The truly universal principle of philosophy, the principle which concerns equally mathematics, mechanics, logic, aesthetics, is the principle of justice, equity, equality, equilibrium, harmony."
29. "Proudhon's Challenge," p. 184; *De Anima*, 417b2.
30. "Proudhon's Challenge," p. 184.
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Existence*, p. 93.
33. "Proudhon's Challenge," p. 182.
34. For example, *Existence*, p. 99: "It follows from this that whereas the created existent is never alone when it exercises its liberty in the line of good, and has need of the first cause of all that it produces in the way of being and of good, contrariwise, it has no need of God, it is truly alone, for the purpose of freely nihilating, of taking the free first initiative of this absence (or 'nothingness') of consideration, which is the matrix of the evil in the free action--I mean to say, the matrix of the *privation* itself by which the free act (in which there is metaphysical good in so far as there is being) is morally deformed or purely and simply evil."
35. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
36. *Ibid.*, pp. 127-28.
37. Y. Simon, "Jacques Maritain: The Growth of a Christian Philosopher," in *Jacques Maritain: The Man and His Achievement*, ed. J. Evans (New York, 1963), p. 21.
38. *Existence*, p. 130.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 134.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 129.
42. For example, *ibid.*, p. 106fn: "From the moment we understand that if the shatterable impetus is not shattered by the free nihilating of the creature, then it reaches of itself its proximate term, in order to give way to an unshatterable impetus specifically distinct from itself, in which it fructifies of itself and by which the moral good *to-act* is given; from the moment we understand that the *non-nihilating*, which conditions the fructification of the shatterable impetus in unshatterable impetus, does absolutely not imply the slightest contribution made by the creature to the divine motion--from this moment we have beyond question exorcised every shadow of Molinism."