

FREEDOM, EXISTENCE AND EXISTENTIALISM

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We learn about freedom in Jacques Maritain in two ways: from what he says specifically about it and from what he says about the "wrong" meaning of freedom others entertain. I will discuss the former in the first part of this paper, the latter in the second. I will start by outlining the notion of "freedom" in Maritain through the text of *Existence and the Existent* primarily, but also through a brief examination of related works, such as *St. Thomas and the Problem of Evil*, "The Immanent Dialectic of the First Act of Freedom," in *The Range of Reason*, and a "Philosophy of Freedom," in *Freedom in the Modern World*.¹ I will then turn to Maritain's discussion of "existentialism" in Sartre mainly, but also in Heidegger. In this section I will look at the connection between freedom and existentialism as Maritain sees it, but I will also present Plotinus' understanding of "freedom," the main concept in his philosophy, in order to show how this might help pull together various strands of "existentialist" freedom into one coherent whole, somewhat broader than the one Maritain envisions, perhaps, yet still in line with his thought.

Freedom and Existence in Jacques Maritain

The first point to note is that Maritain starts by linking human and divine freedom, and citing St. Thomas in connection with his doctrine of freedom: our freedom is grounded in our reason, it is inescapably our nature.² Maritain sharply distinguishes Kant's doctrine of freedom, which he characterizes as "opposing the order of Freedom to the order of Nature or of Being," from the philosophy of St. Thomas which "unites without confusing them, and grounds the former in the latter."³ For all his references to our nature and even to nature in general, Maritain sees as a "most awesome mystery" "the problem of the relation between the liberty of the created existent and the eternal purposes of uncreated liberty."⁴ This should not be surprising in a thinker who states categorically that metaphysics precedes ethics, and who discusses the question of freedom against the background of good and evil and the moral life.

Maritain approaches the problem of evil in the traditional way, drawing upon the difference between the human dimension of time and God's eternal, unitary and timeless way of knowing all that concerns human existence. I will not belabour this point as our main concern is with the relation between evil and freedom in the human context. As we saw freedom is both natural and rational, and therefore a human good. "The created existent" -- he says -- "possesses the *whole* initiative of the good," yet he does so only in a secondary sense, leaving the primary role to "creative liberty."⁵ How is our natural rational liberty reconciled with the possibility and the reality of an evil act? Maritain locates the problem is the will in a variation of the Aristotelian "acritic." Evil arises in the action but, prior to acting, man does not consider the "appropriate rule" governing the action he considers performing, that is, he ignores the input of right reason. Consideration of the rule, Maritain says, is not a duty, although "making the choice" through the right action is. It is our "freedom of the will" which is to blame.⁶

Now the problem of choice and the failure of the will was originally posed by Aristotle. Yet, in that doctrine, the acritic *knows* but cannot overcome, and the question remains one of choice, rather than of freedom.⁷ There is no question of being mistaken or of incapacity, on the part of the acritic person, either to know the truth about the universal norms governing his action or about the particular action in the context of a specific situation. For Aristotle then, it is not a question of lack of consideration of any rule: it is rather "the impulse that is contrary to right reason (which) bears the guilt,"⁸ so that the failure that permits the man who knows and understands what is right but acts wrongly instead cannot be blamed on knowledge as such. It is instead a failure of the will, which brings the problem back to a question of freedom. How can someone, who knows better, be somehow coerced by a wrong passion he sees for what it is? Why is even knowledge, the highest of human capacities and activities, not sufficient? Fr. Owens suggests:

But the particular moral knowledge that the act is wrong, if it is actually present, is there as detached from its moral roots.⁹

Yet it is worth keeping in mind that, while "free choice is discussed at length by Aristotle, the problem of free will is not."¹⁰ Maritain cites St. Thomas: "freedom of the will sufficiently accounts for the fact that the will has not looked at the rule..."¹¹ He further speaks of the "vacuum" or "lacuna which St. Thomas calls non-consideration of the rule," and then adds:

For of itself it is not a duty for the will to consider the rule; that duty arises only at the moment of action, of production of being, at which time the will begets the "free decision" in which it makes its choice.¹²

I have cited this passage verbatim for two reasons: first, I don't think it reflects fairly the thought of Aquinas, and second, I think it brings Maritain quite close to the very "existentialist" approach he decries.

St. Thomas clearly points the finger of blame at free will for the wrong choices which sin represents: "Defectus iste non reducitur in Deum sicut in causam sed in liberum arbitrium" (S.T., I-II, resp.; ad 2). Now, Maritain bases his interpretation upon *De Malo* (1.3). In that work, St. Thomas discusses whether the case of evil is the good. His argument compares evil in natural things to evil in things which are willed. In both it happens "per accidens" and as a deficiency of the good. The will plays the pivotal role: the adulterer perceives his action as desirable and good, yet he does not see the unavoidable conjunction between that "good" and evil. It is the second aspect, that is, the privation of good, which prompts Aquinas to discuss free will. "Rule and measure are necessary in all things." The craftsman needs to take them into consideration before working his craft, without them he will not draw a correct line or cut right. Similarly, the agent has choice through his free will. Maritain claims it is not required to always consider "the rule"; so does Aquinas, but he adds that man *is* required to do so before choosing, *not*, as Maritain states, only "at the moment of the production of being" (i.e., the moment of action). If rational reflection were not required, we would have obedience to an impulse, rather than a *freely chosen* decision.

Maritain discusses the same problem once again, in *St. Thomas and the Problem of Evil*. Evil lies in acting without reference to the "rule," he states, and then proceeds to outline two "ontological moments": "first moment, not considering the rule, which is a negation, an absence, the lack of a good which is not yet due; and second moment, acting on that negation...."¹³ It is a small point of difference between St. Thomas and Maritain, but I think it is important: the high status of freedom, which Maritain wants to extol, is diminished if there is no good or evil in the free choice of non-consideration, but only in the action that ensues.

At any rate, our main concern at this time is the meaning of freedom, and perhaps a consideration of Plotinus' understanding of the concept, might help the task of exegesis. Freedom is at the very apex of his philosophy: it is what the One is, and what our upper soul strives to acquire in its ascending return. Yet it cannot be "freedom" of impulse or--he says--"infants, maniacs and the distraught would be primary examples of free agency. We are free, for him, when we are not constrained by "what is

outside us," which encompasses not only circumstances and individuals external to us but also those aspects of our soul which are not truly "us," that is, the upper soul, and are therefore deemed to be "external" to us. In the light of this argument, perhaps Maritain's expressions "freely non-acting" and "non-willing" can be spoken of in a way which might better express their true meaning as "non-freely acting" and "non-willing." If both truly "free action" and truly "free will" have no real meaning aside from the right reason that makes them correspond to Being and Truth, and thus to Uncreated, Creative Freedom, then it is hard to see how Maritain can speak of "creative Freedom," and yet allow the same expression, that is, "freedom" to characterize an action which is a privation of that Being which alone exists in total Freedom. Maritain himself says that "nothingness" has entered into the free initiative of the existent, and then cites Scripture: "For, without Me, you can do nothing" (John XV.5).¹⁴ I would like to add "You can do nothing *free*" as well: not truly free, that is, if ruled by impulse or even ignorance. In the case of the latter, not only would it not be a free action, but not even the action of a moral agent: and therefore it would be incompatible with a consideration of evil.

The reference to Plotinus as a source (albeit an indirect one, may be through Augustine and Aquinas himself) can be extended to Maritain's discussion of the will of God, which--he says--is a "true and active will which projects into the universality of existents the being and goodness that penetrates them...."¹⁵ In his treatment of "Free Will and the Will of the One," Plotinus says:

Now assuredly an Activity not subjected to Essence is inherently free; God's selfhood, then, is its own Act.¹⁶

And Maritain says: "The will of God is not, like ours, a 'power' or faculty which produces acts: it is pure act." Freedom, for Maritain, therefore, is primarily Creative Freedom, it "activates" the existents "according to the mode of their fallible freedom, that is to say, according to shatterable motions or activations."¹⁷ These activations arise out of Creative Freedom, and thus should give rise to free action when they are not "shattered." When they are, and to the extent that they are, the actions will be negated in being, goodness and-- ultimately--freedom.

Therefore it seems to me that, whether Maritain says it explicitly or not, at least some measure of "negated freedom" or "un-freedom" should accrue to evil actions so that it might be self-contradictory to term these actions "free evil acts," as Maritain does,¹⁸ and "voluntary evil acts" might represent a more accurate description. Speaking of the first moment in the "ontological order" which, as we saw, Maritain discusses in *St. Thomas and the Problem of Evil*, he says: "...the first moment is voluntary, it is free, and it is not yet sin but the root of sin...."¹⁹ Now "voluntary" and "free" are not

identical concepts, so that--given Maritain's own emphasis on Uncreated Freedom as primary, we might want to accept Plotinus' division of the two. After all, Aquinas places the "ratio nem culpa" not in "freedom" as such, but in unconsidered choice:

...sed ex hoc accipit primo rationem culpa quot sine actuali consideratione regulae procedit ad huiusmodi electionem (*De Malo*, q.1, a.3, resp.).

Maritain also talks of freedom in chapter six of the *Range of Reason*.²⁰ He starts with the introspective quest for the first time freedom truly affected his own life in a non-trivial way; the "first act of freedom" refers therefore to "a deep seated determination - a root act" which "impresses a definite direction upon his life as a person." Once again "the first act of freedom" is linked to God, through the good and free choice. The example Maritain offers is that of a child who freely decides to abstain from a moral wrong, choosing a moral good not because of fear or even love, but because "it would not be good". It is a choice for the "moral good," an all-important first choice, which "transcends the whole order of empirical convenience and desire."²¹

What are the implications of this "act of freedom"? It represents a pre-cognitive awareness of a "law of human acts transcending all facts." Yet it is not an abstract law in opposition to myself that I am aware of as a child; rather, I am aware in some way of the coincidence of "the good and my good." In effect, while the child's act of freedom is not the manifestation of cognitive reflection, it is the precognitive awareness of God:

...the child does not think explicitly of God, or of his ultimate end. He thinks of what is good and of what is evil. But by the same token he knows God, without being aware of it.²²

Therefore the first exercise of individual freedom coincides with the unimpeded unfolding of the child's true nature, a manifestation of his "inclination" towards God, which exists independently of conscious, discursive knowledge of God. Clearly, it is not an ultimate choice for all time, but it is the seed which can "bear fruit," Maritain adds, only through grace.²³ Without God, the first act of freedom could only be "a sin which turns him away from his ultimate end."²⁴

The ambiguity I pointed out earlier in Maritain's doctrine of freedom surfaces again: if the paradigm "first act of freedom" entails choosing the good through a pre-cognitive, non-conceptual awareness of God, then it does not seem right to use precisely the same term to describe the choice of evil,

as the same description would in fact describe two totally different realities. Therefore, either one or the other action cannot be a "first act of freedom." Given the identification Maritain suggests, of Freedom with Creative Freedom, the choice of evil would seem--as Plotinus would put it in a non-Christian context-- eminently unfree.

In this apparent tension in Maritain's teaching resolved by the examination of other texts such as "A Philosophy of Freedom"? He returns to the interrelation between Nature (or Being) and Freedom in St. Thomas under three headings: 1) How the order of Freedom necessarily presupposes the order of Nature; 2) How it is yet distinct from the order of Nature and constitutes a world apart; 3) In what the dynamism of Freedom consists and what the essential law of its movement is. The primacy of Nature is obvious, as freedom is natural, "the essence of every intellectual being."²⁵ But Aquinas himself says that "the whole root of freedom lies in reason" (*De Ver.* 24.2). And, since he specifies in the *Summa* that this is so in two senses, this is where the textual base for Maritain's discussion of the "rule" can be found:

Regula autem voluntatis humanae est duplex; una propinqua et homogenea, scilicet ipsa humana ratio; alia vero est prima regula, scilicet lex aeterna, quae est quasi ratio Dei." (S.T. I- IIae, 76.1.resp.)

Although Maritain states that consulting the rule is not a requirement, it seems to me that in either of the two senses Aquinas ascribes to it, consulting reason is required of all human beings as a natural requirement of their own nature.

Maritain and Existentialism

One can sympathize with Maritain's worries about existentialism in relation to moral action. Most of the exponents of the movement see freedom as cardinally important, what is essentially human, although they don't accept a metaphysical understanding of either the Universe or of man's nature. "They have an authentic feeling for it and for its essential transcendence," Maritain says, speaking of freedom. Further, existentialism "has a feeling for the creative importance of the moral act," coupled with the "uniqueness of the instant."²⁶ He sees the real possibility of a "moral philosophy of liberty," but is discouraged by the problematic of "absurdity," and the lack of a "nature" of "Causality and finality."²⁷ Apparently he alludes to the existentialism of Sartre, yet by tarring all existentialism with the same brush he does injustice to the thought of Heidegger, for instance, which may be deemed "guilty" only in a very limited sense of the "sins" Maritain ascribes to the whole movement.

The only good or "authentic" existentialism for Maritain is that of St. Thomas, characterized by the "primacy of existence," while not denying

either "natures" or transcendental finality and still standing by the "supreme victory" of intelligibility and intellect. The "wrong" existentialism, on the other hand, degenerates into a "pure Efficiency or Liberty...positioning itself without reason."²⁸ Therefore it is not freedom itself that Maritain condemns, but a freedom which is allied to neither reason nor a transcendental end, that is, existentialism, which is not in the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition and which therefore "misconceives liberty." It is clear that a liberty which is not modelled upon the "world of Freedom" and man's spiritual nature is not really freedom, though Maritain does not say so in so many words. He refers, for instance, to "the supreme rule or norm of Freedom. In this wise the world of Nature and the world of Freedom have the same head." If God is Uncreated Freedom, any thinker who will not admit His existence will be working within a truncated, incomplete sense of freedom. To this extent at least, Maritain is right about his general assessment of "existentialism": both Sartre and Heidegger, the two main thinkers he cites in this respect, do not admit to a divine sense of freedom, let alone to Uncreated Freedom as the primary meaning of the concept.

On the other hand, the indiscriminate understanding of freedom as "anything goes," which would allow man to make himself as he goes along with no guidance, through an infinity of choices, does not do justice to Heidegger's thought on the topic. What is freedom for Heidegger? It is truth, as the "unconcealedness" of beings:

Freedom understood as letting beings be, is the fulfillment and consummation of the essence of truth in the sense of disclosure of beings.²⁹

How can one understand freedom as "letting beings be"? Freedom, as we normally think of it, is related primarily to us, to the subjects, who want to be free from impediments and free to pursue our own choices. Heidegger immediately moves the emphasis to the other: I am free when I let other beings be. This letting be is not an attitude of *laissez faire*, in the sense of lack of concern or interest. If I say "let me be," I usually mean "leave me alone" or "don't concern yourself with me." Heidegger instead wants to understand freedom as letting things be, in the sense of manifesting care (*Sorge*),³⁰ interest, concern, in order to understand what they truly are, and to allow them to be just that. Such understanding and caring are connected with and represent "the fulfillment and consummation of the essence of truth." If we understand a man as a man, we know truthfully what he is and know the truth of their being. In this "freeing" type of understanding truth comes forth only when beings are approached and viewed in their situatedness.

Yet, one may well ask, is there any moral "substance" to the identification of freedom and truth, any lead to what would constitute a moral choice in his thought? Heidegger does not write specifically on ethical questions, but he does not appear to deem all possibilities equally viable: the notion of "possibilities worth preserving and handing down" expressed by Heidegger through his notion of the "hero" can enable us to differentiate between an infinite range of choices, and the somewhat more limited variety of beings we can "love, favour, and embrace in their essence." The method of choice arises through a consideration of each thing in the light of both its situatedness in Being, as mediated through our context and horizon (or all that is with us now), and the tradition that has formed us and through which we decide what to appropriate and preserve. Thus, the "hero" encompasses at the same time past traditions, the present horizon, and future projections: this understanding is imperative if we are to consider and decide upon the possibilities authentically worth repeating.³¹ Thus each instant, if authentically lived, should share in and contain past and future, thus turning the unfolding of time and tradition, with its myriad varied aspects, into one infinitely rich and fruitful totality.

Can we claim that this understanding of freedom, truth, and choice involves God? It clearly does not, as such, but neither does it exclude the possibility of choosing and freely appropriating any aspect of the great traditions that inform us. The strong feeling for the "uniqueness of the instant" which Maritain saw as a great merit of existentialism is therefore, at least in Heideggerian terms, the uniqueness of an enriched instant, in which past, present, and future are uniquely and intrinsically interwoven. In such an instant, truth and freedom are actually and truly present. Schmitz says, speaking of metaphysics:

Its last word is not that a certain thing is or will be or even that it merely is, but that all being, including what was and what is yet to be, must manifest a presence. This converts past, future, and present into being qua being.³²

Conclusion

We have discussed two main, related questions in this paper: the meaning of freedom as such in Jacques Maritain, in its relation to existence, and freedom in its relation to existentialism. On the first question we saw that Maritain speaks of Uncreated Freedom, thus linking freedom to the *Ipsium Esse Subsistens* of Aquinas. The identification of Freedom and Existence in the Thomistic sense is thus clear, though a possible difference between Maritain and Aquinas can be traced on the question of evil and free choice. Maritain places evil in wrong action (i.e., action not chosen after due consideration of the rule of right reason) whereas St. Thomas clearly places the first instance of evil in the unconsidered choice itself. The

Aristotelian background of both doctrines in free choice is evident in Aquinas' doctrine and language. I suggested that discriminating between "voluntary" and "free," as Plotinus--for instance--does, would serve Maritain's own understanding of freedom better, although I am not sure that it would help bridge the gap between himself and Aquinas. The Plotinian separation of free from voluntary, I think, would also help to clarify the differences between Maritain's "true existentialism" and "existentialism" as such. The former is described as a philosophy where a) existence is viewed as primary, and b) where man's freedom is seen to be at the same time part of his nature and transcendent, and thus identifiable with Divine Freedom. Non-thomistic existentialism is deemed to be necessarily misleading because of the lack of these components. On the other hand, as we saw, in Heidegger's existentialism there are elements which at least come close to the standards Maritain outlines for "true existentialism." It is clear that there is not much point in seeking a theistic existentialism in either Sartre or Heidegger. That represents a definite lack, particularly in Maritain's view. Yet even a non-Christian doctrine of freedom, such as that of Plotinus for instance, can treat it as a) transcendent, b) man's true nature, and c) tied to truth and the First Principle. Now Heidegger's thought also shows freedom to be more than having an unlimited number of choices. Through his understanding of temporality, the import of historicity, and the real meaning of truth, Heidegger's "freedom" is a much richer concept than the one Maritain ascribes to non-Thomistic existentialism, as we have seen. Further, although Heidegger does not discuss the question or any point of ethics, it seems as though freedom as truthful disclosure of beings is not just any choice, so that for him too one might be able to separate the voluntary from the truly free, at least to some extent.

A close examination of Maritain's understanding of freedom, particularly his view of the possibility of evil being found only in improperly chosen *action*, tends to align Maritain with existentialism, particularly that of Heidegger, although his undoubted Thomism adds dimensions Heidegger did not even wish to explore.

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NOTES

1. Maritain, J. *Existence and the Existent*, English tr. L. Galantiere and Gerald Phelan (Westport, 1975) *St. Thomas and the Problem of Evil*, Aquinas Lecture, 1942, (Milwaukee, 1942); *The Range of Reason*, Geoffrey Bles, London, 1953; *Freedom in the Modern World*, (New York, 1971).
2. Aquinas, Thomas. *De Veritate*, Q. 24, A. 2.
3. Maritain, J. "A Philosophy of Freedom," in *Freedom in the Modern World* (FMW), *op. cit.*, p. 4.
4. Maritain, J. *Existence and the Existent* (EE), ch. 4, p. 85.
5. Maritain, J. *ibid.*, p. 88.
6. Maritain, J. *ibid.*, p. 91; cp. St. Thomas, *De Malo*, Q. 1, a. 3.
7. Owens, J. "The Acrotic's Ultimate Premise In Aristotle," in *Aristoteles Work* (Aristoteles und Seine Schule; Berlin 1985; Walter de Gruyter, pp. 376-392).
8. Owens, J. *ibid.*, p. 385.
9. Owens, J. *ibid.*, p. 390.
10. Owens, J. *ibid.*; cp. Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*.
11. Maritain, J. EE, p. 91.
12. Maritain, J. *ibid.*, pp. 90-91.
13. Maritain, J. *St. Thomas and the Problem of Evil* (S PE), p. 31.
14. Maritain, J. EE, p. 92.
15. Maritain, J. *ibid.*, p. 102.
16. Plotinus *Enneads*, 6.8.20, McKenna tr.; Faber and Faber, London, 1969. On the usage of the word God/divine, Plotinus makes his point in ch. 18 of the same Treatise. The One cannot be defined; he adds: "Thus we must speak of God since we cannot tell him as we would." Maritain's parallel quotation is at EE, ft. 23. p. 115.
17. Maritain, J. EE, p. 103.
18. Maritain, J. *ibid.*, p. 93.
19. Maritain, J. STPE, p. 31.
20. Maritain, J. *The Range of Reason* (RR), p. 66. ft
21. Maritain, J. *ibid.*, p. 68.
22. Maritain, J. *ibid.*, p. 69.
23. Maritain, J. *ibid.*, p. 71.
24. Maritain, J. *ibid.*, p. 74.
25. Maritain, J. "A Philosophy of Freedom: (FMW), p. 6.
26. Maritain, J. EE, pp. 48-49.
27. Maritain, J. *ibid.*, p. 49.
28. Maritain, J. EE, p. 4.

29. Heidegger, M. *Basic Writings*, "On the Essence of Truth," (New York, 1977) p. 29.
30. Heidegger, M. *Being and Time*, trans, McQuarrie and Robinson, (New York, 1962) p. 227; cf. also pp. 235-241.
31. Heidegger, M. *ibid.*, p. 437.
32. Schmitz, K. "A Moment of Truth," *The Review of Metaphysics*, 33 (1980) pp. 686-87.