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If you give democratic peoples education and freedom and leave them alone... they will...make life daily more comfortable, smooth, and bland... But while man takes delight in this proper and legitimate quest for prosperity, there is a danger that in the end he may lose the use of his sublimest faculties and...at length degrade himself... In a democracy therefore it is ever the duty of lawgivers and of all upright educated men to raise up the souls of their fellow citizens and their attention toward heaven. There is a need...to make continual efforts to propagate throughout society a taste for the infinite, an appreciation of greatness, and a love of spiritual pleasures.¹

In his magisterial study of American politics, Alexis de Tocqueville speaks of an inherent tension in modern life between the healthful progress of liberty and the cancerous growth of license. A democratic people that ceases to pursue human excellence, especially its spiritual dimension, is bound to degenerate. No mere expression of nostalgia for a bygone age, Tocqueville's warning is a serious reminder to those who embrace hope for progress in modern civilization not to lose sight of the transcendent and to be mindful of the pursuit of higher human virtues as a ground for moral and political action and theorizing. In spite of Tocqueville's warning, it appears that our politics is moving inexorably, since the past century, toward the very forgetfulness against which he warns.

Speaking of the particular version of liberal political theory that dominates contemporary American thought, Michael Sandel laments our form of discourse, because it insists that "government be neutral on moral and religious questions" and "that matters of public policy and law be debated and decided without reference to any particular conception of the good life."² This way of thinking and acting, Sandel

¹ Alexis de Tocqueville *Democracy in America*, 1st Perennial Library edition by J. P. Mayer (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

² Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 24.

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argues, “cannot contain the moral energies of a vital democratic life.”³ His own Communitarian alternative to contemporary Liberal political theory aims to recover, among other things, some sense of the commitments to formation of character and duty to the common good that animated pre-modern political thought. Sandel is not alone in his thinking. Numerous students of contemporary culture recognize that we are experiencing a crisis of “civilization at the crossroads” between Modernity and Post-Modernity, to adapt terminology used by Jacques Maritain. Modern life focuses increasingly upon the protection of individual rights, while at the same time losing a principled basis for that commitment. Governments become less responsive to individual citizens, precisely because they see themselves as “emancipated” from allegiance to traditional intermediate social institutions, such as the family and religious communities, which formerly gave them structures of representation and meaning.⁴ The paradox of Modern times is therefore a tension between progress in our understanding of the dignity of each individual person, and a diminution of the individual’s relationship to the mediating social institutions and ethical norms that provided the historical ground for this development. Slowly but surely, the Church and Catholic intellectuals have become increasingly aware of the need to respond to this civilizational crisis.

At the mid-point of the previous century, the Catholic Church promulgated the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, toward the close of the Second Vatican Council. This document has shaped the Church’s self-understanding of its responsibility toward the reform and renewal of modern life in the intervening half-century. Although imbued with a spirit of optimism about human progress characteristic of the time, the document evinces awareness of many of the cultural challenges that have become more apparent since its promulgation. Confidently, *Gaudium et Spes* “proclaims the rights of man” and “esteems the dynamic movements of today by which these rights are everywhere

³ Ibid.

⁴ For a helpful discussion of this point, see Pierre Manent, *Democracy without Nations?: The Fate of Self-Government in Europe* (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2007).

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fostered.”⁵ Yet, at the same time, it insists that “these movements must be penetrated by the spirit of the Gospel and protected against any kind of false autonomy.”⁶ As if to echo Tocqueville, the Pastoral Constitution goes on to warn that failure to recognize the place of transcendent goods in human life will lead to the destruction of human dignity, rather than to its preservation. Furthermore, it acknowledges the increasing urgency, due to the growth of skepticism and relativism, for more profound reflection: “Though mankind is stricken with wonder at its own discoveries and its power, it often raises anxious questions about the current trend of the world, about the place and role of man in the universe, about the meaning of its individual and collective strivings, and about the ultimate destiny of reality and of humanity.”⁷ *Gaudium et Spes* thus articulates a comprehensive challenge in moral and political theory for the contemporary Christian intellectual.

Jacques Maritain was an elder statesman and a leading Catholic intellectual of the twentieth century at the time *Gaudium et Spes* appeared in 1965. “Schema XIII,” as he called it in the *Peasant of the Garonne*, promised to light a flame of renewal within the Church and set the blueprint for a new engagement with Modernity. Surveying this situation in *The Peasant*, Maritain understood with clarity that a true dialogue with the modern world could be neither facile nor conducted strictly in traditional terms. Old problems would need to be thought anew in the light of eternal truths. But this “aggiornamento,” as Maritain described it, ought not to be a case of “kneeling before the world,” either.⁸ Merely un-insightful clinging to traditional sources would fail to engage Modernity’s deep and accelerating problems, while uncritical acceptance of modern assumptions would fail to provide viable alternatives. Over forty years later, we continue the effort to navigate between that Scylla and Charybdis of modern life.

⁵ *Gaudium Et Spes*, §41, “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,” Promulgated by His Holiness, Pope Paul VI on December 7, 1965, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/s/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (accessed July 15, 2010).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, §3.

⁸ Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne: An Old Layman Questions Himself About the Present Time* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), p. 53ff.

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This collection of essays addresses the project of civilizational renewal from a variety of viewpoints, including its ethical, political, aesthetic and religious dimensions. The authors provide a variety of perspectives, both critical and hopeful, concerning such matters as the common good, moral truth, the virtues, human sociality, culture, art and the beautiful, Christian morality and metaphysics, and the vocation of a Christian intellectual. The essays draw upon traditional and contemporary philosophical and theological sources, including especially the work of Jacques Maritain. In the spirit of Maritain's Aristotelian-Thomism, perhaps it is best to begin with those considerations that lie at the end, namely both those that are addressed at the end of the volume, and those that concern the ultimate purpose of human life, especially the first principles that ought to guide our thinking. The third section of the book addresses this constellation of concerns, including moral first principles, the importance of a sound metaphysics and philosophical anthropology, and the task and authentic stance of Christian intellectuals toward being and truth.

With respect to these considerations, Maritain's *Peasant of the Garonne* provides a helpful starting point and some important guidance. He suggests that the task of the Christian philosopher is to engage Modernity in light of an understanding of permanent verities, in order to effect the transformation of the temporal world.⁹ Perhaps, when some consider the active transformation of the temporal world, they imagine that Maritain is speaking exclusively of a sort of applied ethics and politics, or even of political activism, but this could not be further from the truth. To the contrary, he emphasizes the importance of "contemplation in the world" over against the misguided sense of a "messianic mission of the proletariat."¹⁰ Two points merit consideration in light of this remark. First, Maritain's sarcasm shows that he is dubious of conceiving the temporal mission of the Christian person primarily or exclusively as the production of a heaven on earth through "social justice." He objects to this conception, in part, because it is utterly utopian and unrealistic. Christian humanism contemplates a more modest and realistic task than Marx, and therefore a more important one according to Maritain, because it is grounded in a

⁹ See *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

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genuine philosophical anthropology, and because it is achievable.¹¹ The second and more important point to be considered is that the vision of a “messianic mission of the proletariat” fails to recognize the importance of “wisdom” itself and the idea of “contemplation in the world,” which is very evidently an amalgam of the themes of action and contemplation. It is not only the Christian philosopher’s task to contemplate what the temporal mission of the laity should be, but to be a witness to the importance of “contemplation in the world” as an essential component of that temporal mission itself.

Maritain suggests that we can begin to understand this concern by considering an essentially continuous line of thinking from Descartes to Marx. In Part VI of his *Discourse on Method*, Descartes announces that we are to achieve mastery of nature, while, for Marx, the work of the communist state is a kind of praxis that, as Maritain observes, will “give [man] full and complete mastery of the world and will make him, so to speak, the god of the world.”¹² On the contrary, Maritain argues that we can never become masters of nature. We can only “intervene in the destiny of the world.”¹³ His point is not only that modern thought overestimates the capacity of human power to subdue the world, but also that it wrongly conceptualizes the relationship of human beings to the world, having lost the sense of the relationship between the Creator and creatures. Modern philosophy tempts us to misunderstand the call to transform our world through activity, because it fails to understand the theoretical and contemplative dimensions of life. Christian philosophy, on the other hand, must be an example of “contemplation in the world.” The contemplative mindset is not only characterized by a certain type of activity, but also by a stance toward the world, which includes respect for an order of truth and goodness that transcends our manufacturing and demands a responsible posture. This view has important ethical and political implications, but it also requires significant epistemological and metaphysical premises. Maritain concludes that Christian philosophy is especially well suited to the task

¹¹ See *Ibid.*, p. 204.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 200.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

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of renewal in the present circumstances, because it is disposed to metaphysical realism and recognition of transcendent truth.

In his recent book, *The Wisdom of the World*, the French thinker Rémi Brague makes essentially the same point. According to Brague, the traditions of Greek philosophy and Biblical faith, synthesized by Christian philosophers in the Middle Ages, understood the importance of what he calls, “the wisdom of the world.”¹⁴ The wisdom of which he speaks is not physicalism or *réal politique*, but an awareness of a transcendent objective reality and the sense of man’s place in a cosmological order that has genuine ethical implications for human existence. The task of engaging Modernity contemplated by *Gaudium et Spes* thus necessitates a careful consideration of metaphysical and ethical first principles, as well as an appropriate reinvigoration of philosophical anthropology. Brague’s use of the term “cosmology” does not imply a crude deduction of ethical and political norms from the stars and human nature, but a reflective understanding of the world in which an explanation of the meaning of human existence is of central importance. The Christian intellectual cannot simply revert to the ancient conception of the *cosmos* as a means of addressing this concern, but he or she must find a way back from the failure of reductionist and empirical conceptions of nature that dominate our contemporary conceptual landscape.

In his article “Christian Identity And Scholarly Vocation In A Secularized World,” Carlos Casanova considers the plight of the contemporary Christian intellectual in the secular academy, including the increasingly secular ethos that pervades even religiously affiliated institutions in the United States. Post-Modern Liberalism’s insistence upon bracketing transcendent principles from our public discourse, according to Casanova, exercises a coercive influence on the standards by which institutions train and measure their up-and-coming academics. He contends that this coercion contributes to a diminution of the quality of scholarly dialogue and teaching at Catholic institutions.

¹⁴ Rémi Brague, *The Wisdom of the World: The Human Experience of the Universe in Western Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

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Denis Scrandis, in his article "Christian Morality: A Morality Of The Divine Good Supremely Loved According To Jacques Maritain And Pope John Paul II," makes the case for the importance of appealing to the transcendent first principles that Casanova laments are often lacking in the modern academy. Drawing upon the moral philosophy of Jacques Maritain and the theology of John Paul II, Scrandis argues that the Christian conception of the transcendent purpose of human life provides essential clarification of certain *aporiae* in Aristotle's classical attempt to articulate human happiness in terms of the natural end of man. In particular, Scrandis points to the Christian understanding of self-giving love as an essential aspect of a satisfactory account of the moral life.

Patrick Lee also takes up this very theme in his essay "St. Thomas On Love Of Self And Love Of Others." It has been said by some influential historical and contemporary commentators that Aquinas' moral philosophy is necessarily a form of moral egoism, because his account of *eudaimonia*, or human happiness, presupposes that the highest end is one's own beatitude. Contrary to this supposition, Lee argues that Aquinas' account of friendship and human excellence depends upon an inherently social conception of human nature. St. Thomas is not an egoist, according to Lee, because for him genuine self-love is inseparable from the love of God and love of neighbor.

James Hanink's essay "Analogy: Mischief, Malice And Metaphysics" picks up the question of the importance of a realist metaphysics and philosophical anthropology as a sound basis for moral philosophy. He applies his insight that a sound metaphysics is essential to the practical questions of one very important form of human friendship—marriage. Hanink makes the provocative argument that clarification of the metaphysical and ontological issues at stake provides reason for defending the distinctive character of the institution of traditional marriage.

Finally, Joseph Califano argues in his article "Truth And Suffering" that coming to terms with the most important, fundamental and comprehensive first principles or truths of human existence requires some experience of human suffering, and that such suffering can for that very reason be a great gift.

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The essays in the first section of the volume depend upon the foregoing metaphysical and anthropological foundations discussed by authors in the third section, while taking up questions concerning the relationship between individual persons and the common good from a variety of perspectives. A central concern of a number of these essays is the relationship between the progress of individual rights in Western culture and the defense of a conception of moral absolutes and the common good, especially as these relate to the American political context.

“There is no peace without justice,” Pope John Paul II often said.¹⁵ Many of our contemporaries, although fond of this expression, strenuously disagree with the stands John Paul took on such fundamental matters as abortion, contraception, and the nature of marital life. Citizens of Western liberal democracies agree about the general principle that social justice requires the protection of fundamental rights, but they disagree with equal vigor concerning who counts as a person, and about the extent and limitations of human rights. What is the source of this simultaneous agreement and difference of opinion? It is a product of the evolution of the doctrine of human rights and the concepts of the dignity and autonomy of persons, upon which the doctrine is based. While we all profess respect for personal dignity and individual autonomy, the theoretical underpinnings of this surface consensus are deeply disputed. The dispute is an inevitable result of the fact that “rights” discourse was intended by many of its early proponents to repudiate traditional concepts of nature, justice and the common good. We ignore this fact at our peril, since it makes us fail to appreciate the difficulty of achieving consensus regarding the necessity of grounding rights in a substantive theory of the human good.

Undoubtedly, acknowledgement of the inalienable dignity of individual persons is of practical value in advancing the cause of freedom. The United Nations adopted a Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Jacques Maritain was instrumental in the

¹⁵ See, e.g., “Message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II for the Celebration Of The World Day Of Peace,” January 2002, URL: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20011211_xxxv-world-day-for-peace_en.html.

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creation of this document. His support for the cause of human rights continued the ground-breaking work in Catholic social thought inaugurated by Leo XIII's encyclical letter *Rerum Novarum*. As a result, Catholic social teaching since Vatican II has placed heavy emphasis upon the rights and dignity of the human person. At the same time, however, what constitutes a "human right" and who counts as an entity worthy of respect has been a point of increasing dispute. What is remarkable is that this should come as a surprise to any Catholic social theorist. Maritain recognized that talk about natural or human rights involves an agreement to disagree about the theoretical underpinnings of a theory of justice. In the wake of various challenges to the natural law tradition in the early modern period, thinkers postulated the existence of certain inalienable natural rights. Thanks in part to the work of Immanuel Kant, we have come to understand these rights in terms of a theory of autonomy. But Kant divorced the concept of personal autonomy from a substantive conception of human nature as ordered to a final end. Those who have followed in Kant's wake have taken this doctrine further, conceptualizing human rights as "unencumbered" properties belonging to persons regardless of any particular substantive vision of human nature or the moral good.

This raises a serious question as to whether the modern language of "rights" can be domesticated by the efforts of Catholic social theorists, including Maritain, in order to render it compatible with traditional accounts of the natural law and justice. The empirical evidence of growing disagreement about how to define and limit contemporary rights claims renders this prospect increasingly doubtful. Maritain's work in this area is especially seminal, because he represents one of the best-known efforts to straddle the divide between the older natural law tradition and the contemporary discourse of human rights. His work also appears to contain various successful and failed strategies. For instance, his personalistic account of human dignity may allow him to avoid many of the pitfalls of the modern "unencumbered" conception of the self, because it recognizes the necessity of rooting human dignity in a substantive conception of human nature and the human good. Furthermore, Maritain's "personalist" as opposed to "individualist" view of persons insists upon a relational account of the person and society and asserts an important difference between genuine liberty under law and mere license. On the other hand, some scholars have

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suggested that Maritain's "integral humanism" goes too far in the direction of accommodating modern Liberalism's understanding of individual freedom and pluralism.

The source of Maritain's putative difficulties in this area may have originated with the emergence of the rights doctrine as a form of discourse in Catholic social teaching during the nineteenth century. The language of rights, especially natural rights, became a familiar part of the vocabulary of Papal teaching with the publication of Leo XIII's encyclical letter *Rerum Novarum* in May of 1891. As Ernest Fortin points out in his study of the encyclical, Pius IX had condemned the errors of Modernism as late as 1864 and had resisted the intrusion of Liberalism into the Church's teaching at that time.¹⁶ Leo XIII, on the other hand, embraced the doctrine of natural rights as a means of providing the Church's response to social concerns arising out of the struggles between labor and capital in the 19th century. Leo did not implement the rights doctrine uncritically in his encyclical. He was careful to combine the language of rights in the document with that of duty.¹⁷ In addition, the foundation for his doctrine of rights was the Thomistic conception of natural law and its corresponding teleological account of human nature.¹⁸ Modern doctrines, on the other hand, tend to treat rights as benefits or moral powers belonging to an agent, not duties arising from the order of law and justice.¹⁹ Some critics maintain that this development in Catholic social teaching is unprecedented, and that it constitutes a dangerous opening to radical individualism and moral subjectivism.²⁰

¹⁶ See Ernest L. Fortin, "Sacred and Inviolable: *Rerum Novarum* and Natural Rights," in Ernest L. Fortin and J. Brian Benestad, *Human Rights, Virtue, and the Common Good: Untimely Meditations on Religion and Politics* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996).

¹⁷ See, for example, *Rerum Novarum*, §12-13, which speaks of the "rights and duties" of the state and the family.

¹⁸ See, for example, *Rerum Novarum*, §9.

¹⁹ See Fortin, "Sacred and Inviolable," pp. 202-05.

²⁰ See, for example, Robert P. Kraynak, *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy: God and Politics in the Fallen World* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).

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The extent to which Pope Leo's endorsement of rights language represents a problematic departure in thinking depends significantly upon how we understand medieval theology's relationship to the rights doctrine. Opinions on the subject vary. John Finnis, for example, argues that Thomas Aquinas had a conception of natural rights, even if he did not have the terminology to express it.²¹ On the other hand, scholars such as Ernest Fortin and Robert Kraynak argue that Aquinas never had anything like a modern concept of rights, nor indeed the political ideology that underlies them. The core of their argument is that medieval thinkers emphasized virtue and duty towards the common good as primary, whereas the modern language of rights in Locke and Hobbes emphasizes the priority of the atomistic individual and claims made upon the social order.²² Fortin offers a compelling illustration of this point in his discussion of *Rerum Novarum*. Pope Leo asserted in §7 that "Man precedes the state, and possesses, prior to the formation of any state, the right of providing for the substance of his body."²³ Pointing to Aristotle and Aquinas' view that the state is prior in nature to the individual, Fortin suggests that Leo's departure from the classical terminology constitutes, in essence, an embrace of the contractarian notion of a state of nature in place of the Aristotelian-Thomistic concept of the naturalness of the community and the priority of the common good. The embrace of the natural rights tradition in *Rerum Novarum* thus constitutes an important departure from the tradition.

²¹ See John Finnis, *Aquinas: Moral, Political, and Legal Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

²² See, Fortin, "Sacred and Inviolable," pp. 201-07; p. 21: "The passage from natural law to natural rights and later (once 'nature' had fallen into disrepute) to 'human' rights represents a major shift, indeed the paradigm shift in our understanding of justice and moral phenomena generally. Prior to that time, the emphasis was on virtue and duty, that is to say, on what human beings owe to other human beings or to society at large rather on what they can claim from them."

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 202 and 206. For a similar claim about the priority of the possession of natural rights to the state, see *Rerum Novarum*, §12-13: "Hence we have the family...a society very small, one must admit, but none the less a true society, and one older than any state"; "...the family must necessarily have rights and duties which are prior to those of the community, and founded more immediately in nature."

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In response to this line of argumentation, it must be granted that modern rights theories often pit the rights of the individual against duty, the moral law and the common good. There is an obvious sense in which the language of “right” or “rights” has been transformed by atomistic conceptions of the individual and the rejection of natural teleology, which specifies the priority of the political community. These terminological transformations have important implications that cannot be ignored. The remaining question is whether these obvious and important differences in terminology and concepts create a gap that cannot be bridged between the language of natural law and that of natural rights, or whether there is a way to preserve the tradition while engaging the modern world in its own terms. In other words, is there a way of speaking the Kantian language of the dignity of the person without failing to recognize the priority of duty, law, virtue and nature?

An important line of thinking concerning this question, which is addressed by several essays in the volume, is that Maritain’s philosophical personalism provides a means of achieving that goal. He lays down the key tenet of his personalist philosophy, the distinction between “personality” and “individuality” in *The Person and the Common Good*.²⁴ According to Maritain, contemporary political regimes, including the United States, stray from their appropriate foundations when they embrace a radically individualistic conception of persons over against a relational conception of citizens as both free and simultaneously obligated to a community. This relational conception allows him to speak of the inherent dignity of the individual, and to be comfortable with the language of rights. But his conception of personal dignity is grounded in our status as creatures made in the image and likeness of God, who are ordered to natural and supernatural fulfillment. Personalism thus provides Maritain with a vehicle to affirm a coherent framework from which to defend both liberty and moral obligation to the common good.

In a sense, the conception of the person for which he wishes to argue is a retrieval of an earlier, pre-modern view, since it recognizes a

²⁴ Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, translated by John J. Fitzgerald (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966).

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transcendent dimension of human personality as ordered to a final end specified by our nature.²⁵ On the other hand, it is clear from Maritain's argument that our full awareness of the political role of personality is distinctively modern, in part because it is a deliberate reaction to radical individualism, and in part because the distinctively modern awareness of human subjectivity is new.²⁶ Maritain does not therefore regard the modern turn toward the "self" and interiority as unqualifiedly bad. It is unhealthy when we lose sight of the fact that individual human beings' value is firmly rooted in their transcendent dignity as creatures made in the image and likeness of the Creator. The modern preoccupation with "human dignity" is therefore not misplaced when the source of that dignity is properly understood. Maritain can then endorse the value of concepts such as "autonomy" and "individual freedom," provided they are placed in the proper context.

For Maritain, materialistic philosophies of human life, on the other hand, share some key deficiencies, whether they are individualistic or collectivist. The individual is treated as an "atomic" component of the state.²⁷ Both extremes repudiate the idea of a natural or "organic" harmony between individual and communal goods.²⁸ Common ethical norms are therefore imposed against the will. More significantly, materialism denies the intrinsic ordination of the person to a transcendent good, toward which the common good of the state must be "indirectly" subordinated.²⁹ Maritain notes that modern liberal democracies fail to overcome these difficulties, just like their totalitarian and communist counterparts, although for them the stakes are ultimately higher. Neither the Third Reich nor Stalinist repression could contain the aspirations for liberty of the millions they oppressed and killed. But McDonald's and the Internet are a great deal more seductive. In the final analysis, Maritain proposes that liberal democracy will survive and flourish only if it repossesses a sense of its

²⁵ See *Ibid.*, pp. 11 and 13.

²⁶ See *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

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subordination to a spiritual quest that cannot be its own particular goal, but must, in a plurality of ways, be the goal of its citizens.³⁰

In discussing his own view, Maritain stresses that there is no single doctrine of “personalism” as such.³¹ It is not a particular thesis or school of thought. If there is a family resemblance among these views, it is that the concept of “person” provides a suitable focal point for a critique of nineteenth century individualism and its antithesis, collectivism. Maritain draws upon his personality/individuality distinction in order to argue that, whereas individuals are strictly incommunicable, persons are inherently social and capable of self-giving.³² Of course, for St. Thomas, incommunicability is an essential feature of personality.³³ But Maritain is aiming at a point on which he and St. Thomas can find common cause. The individuality or distinction that marks material substances divides them from the rest of reality, whereas personality, both in the case of the Trinity and also of human persons, indicates “subsistence” or “interiority to oneself” and simultaneously community.³⁴ Personality suggests a kind of wholeness or unity that is not contrary to being a part of something else.³⁵ Liberal individualism conceives of human beings as atomic wholes that cannot easily be joined to one another, while communist and totalitarian collectivism must reject the integrity of the individual in order to reduce him or her to being a part of the whole. Maritain sees in the shift from “individuality” to “personality” a healthy middle course to follow, between individualism and collectivism.

Some may think of the concept of “personality” as an expression of self-interest and power, like Callicles in Plato’s *Gorgias*, who advocates *pleonexia* or constant over-reaching toward self-gratification.³⁶ Maritain calls the reader’s attention, on the other hand, to the “personality” we

³⁰ See *Ibid.*, p. 105.

³¹ See *Ibid.*, p.12.

³² See *Ibid.*, p. 39.

³³ See ST I 30.4c.

³⁴ Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, p. 41

³⁵ See *Ibid.*, pp. 56-58.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

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associate with heroism, generosity and self-sacrifice. He makes sense of these incompatible characterizations of personality by identifying a “material” and “spiritual pole” in human nature.³⁷ The material dimension of nature is the source of our separation from all other things—our individuality. The spiritual dimension of nature is the source of an agency that goes out from the person to other beings—our personality. Persons are therefore centers of action who are capable of self-giving in spite of their material separation and incommunicability.³⁸ Focusing exclusively upon material individuality leads us away from the community of other persons, toward physical self-gratification, and it fails to recognize the higher calling of human personal life.³⁹ This, in turn, leads to distorted political theories that stress radical individualism or the subordination of the individual to the collective. The metaphysical conception of persons as unities of matter and spirit ordained to the transcendent good of friendship with God and one another thus provides Maritain with a powerful tool for analyzing and offering a corrective to the pitfalls of nineteenth and twentieth century political ideologies.

Contemporary Liberalism views the common good as the maximal concomitant liberty of each material or “unencumbered” individual.⁴⁰ The rights of the individual are characterized as being apart from and prior to any substantive conception of the human good. Maritain’s personalist conception, on the other hand, recognizes the ordination of the political community to a good for each person that transcends the material dimension of individuality. For the sake of this good, which is genuinely a good for each, and for the common good of society, some material liberties to dispose of ourselves and others as we wish are limited. This point is the basis for Maritain’s claim that the secular political state, while it must admit religious pluralism and other forms of diversity, should simultaneously have an uncompromising commitment to objective principles of the natural law and to a deeper sense of the transcendent value of human life. Since the political

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

³⁸ See *Ibid.*, p. 39.

³⁹ See *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁴⁰ See *Ibid.*, p. 50.

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common good must respect the transcendent vocation of human persons, Maritain's conception of liberty and the protection of rights is very different from that of contemporary Liberalism. We do not respect the dignity of persons merely by removing any and all barriers to the satisfaction of personal preferences. Although a pluralistic society such as the United States cannot make the deeper purpose of human life its direct objective, it must secure the pursuit of that higher purpose for its members. This includes those who claim that pursuit as their birthright, as well as those who do not, and also the defenseless, who cannot claim it. Genuine respect for persons thus includes the political community's commitment to principles of the natural law and human fulfillment.⁴¹ Genuine liberty is therefore inherently social, and it can only be preserved through the acknowledgement of objective truths about the transcendent good of human persons.

The essays in the first section of the volume address the foregoing concerns relating to the individual and the common good, the necessity of grounding a concept of rights in substantive moral first principles concerning the human end, and human beings' natural sociality. They draw upon a variety of sources from within the Catholic intellectual tradition, including Maritain, Aquinas and Aristotle, among others. Particular attention is given to the question of whether Maritain's personalism is able to provide him with the tools necessary to balance individual rights against duties of justice, virtue, and the common good. Peter Simpson's essay "We Are Bruised Souls: Maritain's America Fifty Years On" takes up these questions by offering a careful consideration of how Americans can say that out of the many we form one body politic. Simpson compares Jacques Maritain's and Karol Wojtyła's philosophical personalism as two distinct but related ways of accounting for genuine political community. He takes the personalistic notion of human beings as centers of interiority and self-gift as a way of describing what constitutes the community, and he applies this concept to Maritain's observation that American optimism is explained by the historical narrative of immigrants who have come to our shores in order to re-invent themselves "hopefully" as members of a new political community. John Trapani discusses one important source of our American hope and optimism, the set of first principles articulated

⁴¹ See *Ibid.*, p. 63.

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in the *Declaration of Independence*, which formulates the propositions that constitute our national identity. His essay, "We Hold These Truths: Objective Truth, Reasoned Conviction, And The Survival Of Democracy," offers a meditation upon the opening words of the *Declaration*. The abiding concern of Trapani's essay, however, is whether we as Americans have lost the deeper meaning of the truth of our ideals. Trapani worries that the principles articulated by the Framers of our political regime have become, in essence, mere words that we repeat out of a sense of loyalty to our traditions, and he contends that unless we repossess a living grasp of the meanings that undergird those words, our way of life will thereby be endangered.

Fr. Joseph de Torre's essay, "The Common Good And The Good Society: The Genesis Of A Concept And Its Consequences," provides a helpful overview of the genesis of the concept of the common good within the Western and Catholic intellectual traditions. As de Torre observes, at the core of the evolution of Western thinking concerning this concept there is a fruitful tension between increasing respect for individual rights on the one hand, and preservation of duties to the community on the other. Having articulated the concept of the body politic and explored some of the essential features of political communities' shared commitments to moral truth and the common good, James Jacobs offers an interesting and provocative argument concerning the concrete implications of these concepts. Contrary to the prevailing academic fashion of procedural political theory, his essay, "Moral Absolutes, Moral Relativism, And Political Representation," sets out to defend two bold conclusions: first, that contemporary efforts to exclude "one's moral vision" from his or her stand on matters of public policy must ultimately reduce to a form of moral relativism, and second, that Christian political candidates who bracket their personal beliefs about the morality of abortion are unsuited for political office. Jacob's conclusions rest upon a fairly straightforward argument, with premises that he admits are highly controversial. The bulk of the essay consists in an examination and defense of his three central premises: 1) that relativists hold each person "competently defines the good for himself," 2) the primary responsibility of government is to legislate for the common good, and 3) that the relativist cannot endorse legislation for the common good,

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since he or she necessarily is agnostic about any particular “vision of the good.”

Arguably one of the most important contemporary Catholic intellectuals to address the question of the relationship between one’s deeply held religious and moral beliefs and life in the public square, John Courtney Murray, is the subject of Michael Torre’s essay, “Murray After Fifty Years: Reflecting On America And Its Proposition.” Torre offers a thoughtful analysis of Murray’s own thinking and various reactions to it by Protestant and Jewish intellectuals over time. Torre’s central thesis is that Murray was correct to assert the need for Americans to repossess the intellectual foundations of their belief in certain moral first principles, by acknowledging and embracing a common commitment to the natural law tradition. Similar to Jacobs and other authors in the volume, however, Torre criticizes what he sees as Murray’s underestimation of the corrosive influence of secular individualist culture upon American’s ability to recognize and accept the common foundation of natural law principles. Fr. James Schall, S.J., in his essay “The Real Alternatives To Just War,” takes up what may constitute a primary example of the distorting effects of contemporary culture upon Americans’ understanding of traditional moral principles. Far from being a “war hawk” or an advocate of moral Machiavellianism, Fr. Schall’s thesis is that it is vitally necessary to make the rational case for some uses of force in our modern world. Schall’s argument rests upon his agreement with St. Augustine that we cannot escape the reality of our fallen human condition. Contemporary culture often tends toward the utopian idea that our institutions have permitted us to evolve beyond war, that “war is not the answer.” Schall reminds the reader that the forgetfulness of our principles associated with this utopian illusion can lead us to fail to protect the very order of peace and justice, and the institutions of liberty, equality, and dignity, that allow us to contemplate such a utopian idea.

A recurring theme in Alice Ramos’ essay, “Toward A Recovery Of The Moral Sense,” is the need for recollecting moral first principles, especially those relating to the transcendent meaning and purpose of human life, which Aquinas argues are contained in the natural *habitus* of *synderesis*. Ramos takes as her point of departure a dialogue between the secular humanist Umberto Eco and Carlo Maria Cardinal Montini. While sympathetic to Eco’s notion of a natural ethics that neither

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presupposes transcendent premises nor is incompatible with them, Ramos observes that "nature wounded by sin does not do all the good that it would have done in the state of original justice." Her contention is that Christian scholars should do more to cultivate the inherent openness of *synderesis* and conscience to the infinite good, which is contained at least implicitly in every operation of conscience. The final essay in the first section of the volume, "Aquinas On Trust And Our Social Nature," by Marie George, considers Aquinas' teachings concerning natural human sociality. Like the preceding essays that concentrate upon the human personal capacity for self-gift, George argues that the forms of trust appropriate to various kinds of friendship provide an essential ingredient for the maintenance of human society. Her account shows that a presumption of trust, with certain qualifications, is necessary. Trust speaks both to the moral goodness of the person who trusts, and also to the possibility for him or her to attain happiness through friendship. George thus shares with Patrick Lee a similar account of the priority of friendship and community in the attainment of human happiness.

The three essays in the middle section of the volume address the relationship between the arts and artistic activity on the one hand and civilization and the human good on the other. To say that this relationship is the most complicated topic considered in the volume's reflection upon the renewal of civilization is almost an understatement. As Jacques Maritain observed on numerous occasions, the relationship between art and morality is complex and multi-faceted. One must avoid the twin dangers of reducing art to morality and of falling into a kind of nihilistic aestheticism. As in his relationship to the modern discourse concerning rights, Maritain was sympathetic both to the classical understanding of beauty, and to the authentic value in numerous contemporary forms of artistic creativity.

In this respect, he differed from some of his religious contemporaries, who were inclined to dismiss various modern aesthetic perspectives as illegitimate. Maritain also differed with those contemporaries who were inclined to reduce artistic expression to a didactic or specifically moral and religious purpose. Here, again, it was necessary to find a path between two extremes. On the one hand, he had to oppose a set of moralizing tendencies that would threaten to diminish the intrinsic value of the artist's aesthetic conscience. On the

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other hand, Maritain was profoundly concerned about the tendency among some modern schools of art to ignore or even repudiate the moral responsibility of the artist, as a person and as a creator of art, to oneself and to his or her community. Similar to his personalist solution to the shortcomings of modern individualism, Maritain's response to the modern artistic challenge was to embrace a forthright dialogue with modernity in light of classical principles.

In *Art and Scholasticism*, for example, Maritain lays down the basic contours of his definition of "art" in classical Aristotelian terms. Art involves a kind of practical intelligence (art itself is an intellectual virtue), but it differs from morality as "making" differs from "doing."⁴² While "doing" is the proper sphere of ethical action, and concerns the virtue of prudence and the good of human persons, art is not, strictly speaking, as an activity or an intellectual habit, concerned with the human good. Considered precisely in terms of its own object, Maritain argues, art "stands therefore outside the human sphere; it has an end, rules, values, which are not those of man, but those of the work to be produced."⁴³ For this reason, he observes, artistic excellence does not always presuppose rectitude of the will with respect to the human good.⁴⁴ In a short work entitled *The Responsibility of Artist*, Maritain cites the artistic genius of Wagner, which was incidentally inspired by an illicit attraction to a woman other than his wife, as an example of this phenomenon.⁴⁵

This way of speaking is, however, open to at least two important forms of misinterpretation. First, we must distinguish the internal demands of artistic excellence, which are governed by the aesthetic requirements of the particular form of artistic activity engaged in by the artist, from the artist's activity as a human person. Maritain is quick to point out that *qua artist*, the activity of the human person enters into the realm of morality: "But for the man working, the work-

⁴² See Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism, and the Frontiers of Poetry* (New York: Scribner, 1962), chapter 2.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ See Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and the Frontiers of Poetry*, chapter 4.

⁴⁵ See Jacques Maritain, *Scholasticism and Politics* (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1960).

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to-be-made enters—itsself—into the line of morality...If the artist took the end of his art or the beauty of the work for the ultimate end of his operation and therefore for beatitude, he would be but an idolater.”⁴⁶ Maritain’s point here is that artists engage in their craft as a form of self-determination and choice. As such, their artistic actions are directed to the attainment of their own final ends, and they also have consequences for others that may contribute to the common good or violate the order of justice. Given that this is so, artists must not fail to appreciate the moral implications of artistic activity. Furthermore, they must not engage in the moral failure of imagining that artistic activity has no moral dimensions or implications.

These concerns are addressed in different ways by Cornelia Tsakiridou’s essay, "When Art Fails Humanity: Jacques Maritain: On Jean Cocteau, Modernism And The Crisis Of European Civilization" and Jorge Garcia’s essay "White Nights Of The Soul: Christopher Nolan's *Insomnia* And The Renewal Of Moral Reflection." Tsakiridou discusses Jacques Maritain’s very personal involvement in the life of the contemporary artist Jean Cocteau, who briefly converted to Catholicism under the influence of the Maritains. Cocteau’s conversion was evidently not to last very long, in part because of his own personal moral struggles, but also in part because of his artistic sensibilities. A central consideration of her paper is Cocteau’s modernist aestheticism, which tended to treat the moral quality of artistic activity—if not the whole of life—superficially. Tsakiridou sees in Cocteau an instance of what Maritain recognized more generally as the crisis of Western civilization’s growing inability to grasp “vital forms of beauty” and value.

More hopefully, Jorge Garcia discusses Christopher Nolan’s film *Insomnia* as an instance of popular artistic culture that demonstrates the possibility of a renewal of ethical reflection. To be sure, Maritain would have been sympathetic to Garcia’s effort, since he did not despair of all things modern—especially modern art. Indeed, Maritain was at pains to clarify both the moral responsibility of the artist, against Post-Modern aestheticism, and the intrinsic responsibility of the artist to his or her work. Maritain opposed what he saw as the

⁴⁶ See Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism, and the Frontiers of Poetry*, chapter 9.

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temptation of some of his co-religionists to favor an excessively traditional representational and moralizing aesthetic.

The claim that art, in itself, considered as an intellectual virtue, is not concerned with the human good, is also open to a second, more subtle, form of misinterpretation, which happens to be the central subject of the other essay found in this middle section of the volume, Monsignor Robert Sokolowski's essay, "Visual Intelligence in Painting."

While the standards of beauty that govern the excellence of a particular artwork may be intrinsic to it, and distinct from moral considerations as such, the subject matter of that work may be the human good itself. As Fr. Sokolowski suggests, the best way to understand a work of art, such as a "portrait" at its highest level, which differs from a mere "likeness," is as a "depiction of an essay at beatitude." Just as spoken or written language can be analyzed in terms of levels of meaning relating to the grammatical components of human speech, so a painting can be analyzed in terms of elements such as color, line, and placement. Ultimately, though, speech is intended to convey a holistic meaning, such as a thought or even a complete argument. Similarly, portraiture and other forms of visual artwork may be described as giving an account of an instance of a life—an attempt at happiness. In this way, also, the artist through his or her artwork is intimately involved in the work of civilization, even though responsibility to his or her activity—the work of art itself—may be governed by a set of standards that are not strictly speaking about the good of the person, but about the good of the thing made.

Given that there are any number of ways in which artistic activity can be said to have ethical implications, one may wonder why Maritain goes to some lengths to show that a classically inspired aesthetic can reserve room for the place of art as an intellectual virtue distinct from moral understanding and judgment. It would appear that this can be explained precisely by his concern to account for what is genuine in the modern repudiation of a moralizing conception of artistic activity, without giving into the assertion that art and the artist ought to have nothing to do with morality. Maritain's constant concern is always to engage in a dialogue with modern life and thought on its own terms, and yet to elevate it with the help of principles drawn from the Catholic and Western intellectual traditions. We may applaud the success or

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criticize the failure of his various attempts to walk this fine line between contemporary thought and the tradition. But, in every case, his work serves as a seminal example of how Christian intellectuals may take up the challenge of the renewal of civilization. The essays in this volume honor Maritain's life and work by attempting to continue that conversation, drawing from Maritain surely, but also engaging freely and forthrightly with classical, medieval and contemporary sources.

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