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Being Is Better Than Freedom

I should like to unfold what is, for me, at any rate, an insight into Maritain's theory of freedom that I stumbled upon while engaged in my own investigations into the problem of reconciling the concept of a universal ideal for culture and progress with the uniqueness and autonomy of the person. Not only does this insight fully illuminate the rationale for this theory, but it also offers more evidence of how integral the notion of being is to the rest of his thought.

The title of this presentation slightly paraphrases a statement found in Maritain's essay "The Thomist Idea of Freedom":

Truly and definitively speaking, being or actuality, according to all the analogical amplitude of the internal perfections which it bears, is best of all. *It is better than freedom.* [Emphasis added.] One does not die in the name of free will; one dies in the name of freedom of autonomy or exultation. And when a man dies in the name of freedom, although he sacrifices his existence to it, this sacrifice is made in the name of a better existence for his fellow-men. For this freedom, the freedom of exultation and of autonomy, is but another name for the plenitude and and superabundance of existence. God exists *necessarily*. He knows Himself and loves Himself *necessarily*. And this infinite necessity is an infinite *freedom of independence*, of exultation and of autonomy. It is *aseitas*, the freedom of independence subsistent by itself (SP 137).

In what precise sense is being better than freedom? Clearly, Maritain does not intend that seemingly paradoxical statement to mean that the fulfillment of the desire for the plenitude of being demands that one relinquish freedom; on the contrary, he insists that the exercise of freedom of the will is ordered to the higher freedom of exultation or freedom of autonomy. The answer is in the very nature of being.

I shall approach the topic of being by way of an overview of Maritain's theory of freedom.

He distinguishes two kinds of freedom: *freedom of choice* and *freedom of spontaneity and independence*. Because his position on freedom of choice is

that of Thomas Aquinas and is thus well enough known, I shall proceed directly to the second kind of freedom. Although essentially a restatement of Aquinas' development of Aristotle's principle, "To live in a living thing is to be," into a theory of autonomy (SP 117-38), not only is this theory less known than the Thomistic theory of free will, but Maritain also adds his own distinctive interpretations to it.

By *freedom of spontaneity*, Maritain means the *absence of restraint*: it is a "freedom which is not a freedom of choice, not a free will, but which, however, deserves, in a quite different sense, the name of freedom" (SP 128). Freedom of spontaneity attains its fulfillment in *freedom of independence or autonomy*. Maritain emphasizes that he does not intend "freedom of autonomy" in the Kantian sense, but rather as "the expansion of and growing realization of human nature" (SP 132). The result of this freedom is *freedom of exultation* (SP). Although freedom of choice is freer than freedom of autonomy insofar as it is free from all necessity, as well as constraint, it is less perfect insofar as it is ordained to the latter (SP 137).

I. Freedom of Spontaneity

The unspoken operative principle in freedom of spontaneity is Aquinas' claim that "... the higher a nature, the more intimate to that nature is the activity that flows from it."¹ From plants to animals to human beings, material nature presents a spectrum of beings exhibiting the capacity to move themselves by a vital interior principle. The activities of subrational beings—growth, assimilation, propagation—although originating in a principle that is increasingly interiorized in proportion to the increase in sensory and neurological complexity, remain nevertheless the products of blind reflexive or, at best, instinctual powers, and for that reason are more characteristic of the species than of the individual member. *Intimate*, in the sense intended by Aquinas in the above statement refers not to what comes from within, where the word "within" has a spatial sense, but rather to what is *singular*, or better yet, *unique* to the individual agent.

II. Freedom of Autonomy or Independence: The Domain of the Person

Of the above categories of living being, man alone acts from a genuinely unified center of unique being—the self or person. As a knower, he can judge the proportion between means and ends and thereby take respon-

¹Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, IV, 11.

sibility for his actions. Just as, on the level of knowing, it is the I, the unique self, who knows, so, on the level of practical activity, it is the self who chooses specific means for specific ends. Thus, at the level of man, "... freedom of spontaneity becomes freedom of independence, for at this point we are concerned with persons endowed with free will, and masters of their actions—persons, each of whom is as a whole or as a universe" (SP 129).

But if Maritain regards the freedom of the human person as his glory, he also regards it as his misery. His very being demands, " 'Let all my activity spring from myself as from its source, and be regulated by me; let me be sufficient unto myself in order to live' " (SP 129). This demand is, however, "an inefficacious metaphysical aspiration" (SP 129). Insofar as he is a person, he longs to rise to always higher degrees of freedom of spontaneity and independence; insofar as he is only a person "in embryo," this aspiration suffers constant frustration (SP 130–31).

As a composite of matter and spirit, he cannot be the source of all his activity. His actions do not flow entirely from a unique interiority; his inclinations and drives largely emanate from what he has in common with his species. In other words, much of his conduct is governed by *what* he is, by his essence. Not even his intellect and will—the two powers that are so much a part of himself, for is it not the I who knows and who takes responsibility for his conduct?—are unique to his selfhood, since they are characteristics of his human essence. Thus, man is not fully self-perfecting, because he is not fully the source of his own actions; he is not fully autonomous (SP 131).

Perfect autonomy belongs to God alone because, as absolutely perfect being, *Being itself*, He is absolutely self-identical. His activity is perfectly immanent and accordingly flows entirely from His unique selfhood; it is perfectly intimate to His unique being (SP 131).

III. The Dynamism of Freedom

If the human person cannot attain perfect autonomy and self-sufficiency of action, Maritain nonetheless sees a fruitful tension arising between his metaphysical aspiration and the constraints imposed upon it by his finitude. Through knowing and choosing, he can rise to ever higher levels of being. As an act of perfect immanence, knowing enables him to interiorize on the intentional level the *nonsel*f; *he thereby becomes the other as other* while retaining his own unique selfhood. Not dominated by matter, his composite nature of matter and spirit leaves him open not merely to other beings but also to the whole universe of spiritual being. This empowers him to become ever higher levels of being, thereby leading him closer to Being itself, God. His encounter with God in the beatific vision

results in his becoming of the *divine other*, transforming freedom of independence or autonomy into *freedom of exultation*.

Through choosing, the agent creates realities in the world, to be sure, and, more importantly in his own being. Choice appropriates concrete realities to the being of the person choosing; for, in thus forming his character, he creates his being by transforming himself on the plane of existence into a unique concrete embodiment of the universal moral law. The happiness chosen by the virtuous man is genuine happiness, insofar as its progressive acquisition constitutes the ever more perfect actualization of the potencies contained in his essence to identify his being with that of the Absolute (SP 136).

This, then, is how Maritain sees the subordination of freedom of choice to freedom of independence or autonomy. In saying that "... freedom of choice is not an end in itself, but that one chooses in order, finally, not to have to choose" (SP 136), he means that the ultimate rationale of freedom of choice is the attainment of absolute being by the person's own capacity for self-perfection. The human person's choice of the Absolute could not, after all, be a choice at all unless he could have chosen what is not the Absolute.

I shall go no further in this explication of Maritain's theory of freedom. I advisedly omit aspects of it which, although important, such as his perceptive discussion of the non-being of evil choices, are unnecessary to the purpose of my presentation.

IV. How Being and Freedom Are the Same

We have seen that, following Aquinas, Maritain attributes freedom to a being in proportion to its degree of immanence. The proportion is implicit in Aquinas' principle, "The higher a being, the more intimate to it is the activity that flows from it." A consideration of the following points will help to establish the significance of this proportion.

First point: The statement "Being is better than freedom" draws upon basic metaphysical principles.

(a) all things are reducible to being, for however they may differ from each other, however unique their basic specificities, they remain, first and last, so many different *ways of being*.

(b) being is the object of all striving, including the exercise of free will; nonbeing cannot be a final cause. Aristotle's argument that the ultimate goal of all human striving is happiness supports this. For, by "happiness," he means the possession of the *good itself*. Since being and the good are convertible, the ultimate goal of our striving is *Being itself*. Approached from the perspective of Thomistic metaphysics, what we seek, first and last, is *existence itself*: "Existence is the act of all acts and the perfection of all

perfections.”

Second point: The absolute primacy of being can be expressed by the venerable principle, “Being is all there is; what is outside being is nonbeing.” Thus, if one being is higher than another, *as being*, that can only be so because the former enjoys more being. Since being cannot be added to, higher beings must *be* more fully than lower beings.

Third point: Since what is outside being is nonbeing, it follows that being cannot be limited by what is outside it, for nonbeing cannot be a limiting principle. Being can be limited only by some limitation within itself. Now this inner limitation cannot be nonbeing in the absolute sense, for the reason just stated. The limitation must be *relative* nonbeing, which is to say, the being’s potency *to be*. Because essence and existence are respectively the principles of potency and act in being, a being is lower in the hierarchy of being to the extent that its essence limits its act of existence and higher to the extent that its essence allows expression of its act of existence.

Fourth point: Being and unity are convertible. A thing has being to the extent that it has unity, which latter is one of the transcendentals. Unity, so construed, designates a thing’s *oneness*, but in the strict and true sense of “oneness”: identity with self.

This means that *uniqueness* is an inevitable consequence of unity because, just to the extent that a thing has unity, to that extent is it identical with itself. Now, because it is impossible for what is, by definition, unique to have an identical duplication, so is it impossible for a self-identical being to be duplicated. But since self-identity and unity go hand in hand, it is impossible to have a plurality of identical beings, for being and unity are convertible terms.

To summarize the argument thus far: (1) *To be* is to be *one*; (2) to be one is to be *self-identical*; (3) to be self-identical is to be *unique*; (4) therefore *to be* is to be unique.

Number three is the crucial step here. Why do self-identity and uniqueness go hand in hand? In other words, why do being (for a thing has being insofar as it has unity) and uniqueness go hand in hand? What about replications of the same brand and style of watch, toy soldiers, automobiles, etc., not to mention the possibility of identical grains of sand, redwood trees, field mice, etc.?

I would respond that such pluralities are possible only to the extent that the individuals in question lack *being*.

Consider: it is impossible, *in principle*, to replicate a person. If we could clone human beings, what we would have produced would be beings identical biologically and genetically, but not identical in personhood. To grasp this difference, imagine two substances for whom “I” meant the

same thing. If such were possible, it would amount to two manifestations of the same substantial self, of one and the same person! (I shall return to this example shortly.) The capacity to think “I” requires a substance that is a *self*. The self-awareness implied in thinking “I” is the psychological manifestation of perfect self-identity—an ontological rather than a merely psychological self-identity.

Personhood, in other words, is simply the highest level of being. Because a thing has unity to the extent that it has being, the higher its place on the scale of being, the more perfect its unity. That is why the person is the perfection of being, and why, too, it is immaterial and unique. For the more fully a thing has being, the more fully does it have unity, and perfection of unity entails perfection of being.

Subpersonal things are dominated by matter and hence, to that extent, they lack being. Matter lacks a center; it consists of parts outside parts and thus, if it can be said to have an essence at all, it is that of extension. When an organism dies, the conspicuous features of its death are the cessation of respiration and motion. But these are only signs of its demise. To die is to corrupt, to go out of being; death is the separation of form from matter. The dissolution of the dead organism is caused by the absence of its form, which is its principle of unity and organization. Bereft of form, the organism loses its substantial being, although it is not thereby annihilated, for it assumes other, perhaps lower, forms of being. Without form, matter reverts to type, going to pieces, which is what “corruption” means.

Insofar as matter lacks a center, insofar as it is “parts outside parts,” it lacks unity. And this is to say that it lacks being to that extent. Thus, if artifacts and natural entities can, in principle, be precisely duplicated, that is just because they are dominated by matter and lack unity—which is to lack identity with self, since matter is “parts outside parts”—and accordingly are, to the extent of that lack, *not being*.

Regarding the earlier observation that two substances for whom “I” meant the same thing would amount to two manifestations of the same substantial self, of one and the same person, I am not affirming the possibility of that kind of occurrence. What I am arguing is that the occurrence, absolutely and logically, could not mean that there were two identical selves; it would instead have to be explained as a simultaneous, spatially dual manifestation of the same self. Selfhood or personhood is substantial being that is immaterial. It is logically impossible for there to be a plurality of identical selves; but since place is a requirement of material substances, i.e., bodies, and not of immaterial substances, i.e., persons, the thought of a self bilocating does not seem to offend reason as much as the thought of two identical selves.

To conclude the argument concerning the fourth point: since, therefore,

a thing is unique to the extent that it is identical with itself; and since it is identical with itself to the extent that it has unity; and since it has unity to the extent that it has being, it follows that a thing is unique to the extent that it has being: being entails uniqueness.

Fifth point: The action that flows from a thing will be intimate to it just to the extent that it flows from it insofar as it is being. To that extent the thing acts *autonomously*, for to that extent it acts from no principle but from what is unique to itself; in other words, its action is not determined by principles outside its identity with itself.

Sixth point: Because potency limits act, and because essence accordingly limits existence, anything less than perfect being, *Being itself*, does not enjoy perfect autonomy. Therefore, being is better than freedom of choice but not freedom of exultation or autonomy since the latter is precisely the action of a thing insofar as it is identical with itself: *being is being*.

Seventh point: In the hierarchy of being, the person shines forth as the only being that enjoys true self-identity. For it alone is capable of a truly *immanent* activity. We have seen that, unlike subrational beings, it acts—insofar as it *knows, chooses, and loves*—from a center unique to itself. This uniqueness of being, this genuine self-identity, is what it means to be a *self* and a *person*.

V. How Being as the Ground of Freedom Harmonizes The Universality and Absoluteness of Being Itself With the Uniqueness and Autonomy of the Person

Besides offering a fuller disclosure of the metaphysical and therefore ultimate rationale for freedom, the grounding of freedom in being also erases the apparently fundamental opposition between personal autonomy and the absolute, universal standards the conformity to which the survival and progress of a culture demands of its members. I emphasize the phrase “the apparently fundamental opposition” for the obvious reason that, given the imperfections of temporal political society, collisions between the human person and institutions will always be both abundant and inevitable. But, at all events, the pluralism that democratic society points to with pride must finally genuflect before common values. Otherwise, the centrifugal force of personal freedom and diversity of philosophies would burst the seams of its institutions.

An ideal for the created universe, and *a fortiori* for a culture, must be universal. But since the latter consists of persons, the only suitable ideal would be that which pertains at once to all human persons insofar as they are human and to each insofar as he is unique. How are universality and uniqueness to be reconciled? The question is but a variant formulation of the problem of universals—How are universal and particular to be recon-

ciled?—which in turn is a variant of the problem of the one and the many: *How can being be both one and many?*

If being is taken as *univocal* in meaning, then, as Parmenides concluded, being is one and plurality is impossible; if being is taken as *equivocal*, then being is many and unity or oneness is impossible. Now, just as the problem of the one and the many finds its solution in the *analogy of being*, so does the problem of reconciling universality and uniqueness find its solution there.

We have noted that being *as being* is unique insofar as being and unity are convertible. We have also noted that the highest being, God, is absolutely unique because absolutely being. In God, therefore, do we have the ideal of all ideals and the standard of all standards.

Through the exercise of free choice, the human person can conform himself increasingly to the ideal of God. Yet, the closer he approaches the realization of that ideal, the more unique and autonomous he becomes. As *Being itself*, God is the absolute standard for all being *insofar as it is being*. Insofar as each creature is, God is its standard. But since it is impossible for two beings to be perfectly identical—*materially* so for subrational beings and *formally* so for rational beings—it follows, then, that the more a being actualizes its potencies *to be*, the more it becomes *itself*, i.e., the *more unique* it becomes. And the more unique it is as a source of activity, the more autonomous it is.

Thus, when Maritain describes the human person as overcoming the constraints on his freedom of independence or autonomy by interiorizing within himself the entire universe through knowing, by appropriating to himself the other *as other*, he has in mind here the human person's capacity to *become the other as other*, thereby enriching his own being and attaining increasingly higher levels of being, and all the while retaining his own unique selfhood. When Maritain describes the human person as overcoming those constraints by exercising free will in such a way as to choose increasingly to conform himself to the universal moral law, he has in mind the human person's capacity freely to become a unique, concrete embodiment of that law. In knowing and choosing, it is the unique self, the I, who identifies with the *other*.

VI. Conclusion

I have tried to show the sense in which Maritain is correct in saying that *being is better than freedom* by demonstrating that, far from being opposed, being and freedom—freedom of independence or autonomy—are one and the same reality. As I said at the outset, this demonstration discloses the ultimate rational ground for his theory of freedom as well as the

latter's integral relationship with his metaphysics of being.

By implication, it also unmask the poverty of current theories of personal freedom, at least as prevalent in Anglo-American circles, which represent freedom as a kind of vague undetermined, uncommitted—what shall I call it? *optionality*? Refusing to acknowledge any ontological determination for freedom, these theories foster a *de jure* incompatibility between person and political society. The demand that I conform my conduct to laws and institutions asks me to surrender the most important part of myself, my freedom to act as I see fit. We are no longer speaking of a tension arising from the imperfections of temporal life and the human situation, but rather one arising from an essential disaffinity.

Consider, for example, Hillary Putnam's recent attempt to reconcile individual freedom with the necessity of a "moral image" to guide society. Embracing a watered-down version of Kant's view of the community of rational beings as "a kingdom of ends," Putnam defends individual freedom by appealing to an equally watered-down notion of *equality*. "Watered-down" because he defends an agnostic realism that confesses the human intellect's inability to know reality *in itself*; he accordingly dismisses the "medieval" assurance that things have essences. As close as he can come, therefore, to grounding his notion of equality in the nature of man is to insist that we are *rational*. Each of us, then, is equally capable, potentially at least, of critically analyzing the assertions of others. This imposes on the political community the mandate of respecting each's freedom of inquiry and criticism.

Putnam defends the notion of a *moral image* for society by arguing that sociopolitical organization and harmony require it. The autonomy implied in the notion of individual equality and the standardization implied in the notion of moral image are reconciled in *epistemological agnosticism*: all theories and claims are open not only to criticism but to falsification.

Lest one suppose that such agnosticism robs the moral image of any compelling rationale for justifying the support of a community's individual members, Putnam appeals to the principle of *reasonableness*:

The fact is that we have *underived*, a *primitive* obligation of some kind to be reasonable, not a "moral obligation" or an "ethical obligation," to be sure, but nevertheless a very real obligation to be reasonable which . . . is *not* reducible to my expectations about the long run and my interest in the welfare of others or my own welfare at other times. I *also* believe that it will

work better in the long run for people to be reasonable, certainly; but when the question is *Why do you expect that, in this unrepeatable case, what is extremely likely to happen will happen?* here I have to say with Wittgenstein: "This is where my spade is turned. This is what I do, this is what I say." [Author's emphasis.]²

The difference between the reconciliation of personal freedom and universal standards in Maritain's theory of freedom and Putnam's theory of equality is that the former is grounded in *being, in what is*, whereas the latter is grounded in *reasonableness*. I have tried to show why Maritain's theory is right. It should be equally evident why Putnam's theory is wrong. For Maritain, freedom of independence or autonomy is the action of an agent to the extent that *it is, has being*; freedom of choice, accordingly, has its ground and goal in what is not only real, but is the foundation of all intelligibility and hence rationality. For Putnam, freedom is a barren *optionality* whose ground is a rationality emptied of all content and foundation.

Writing in the aftermath of World War II, Maritain has underscored the shambles into which democratic institutions have been reduced by the illusion of the self-sufficiency of pure rationality, requiring nothing other than its own critical powers to guide mankind along the path of progress. Being is better than freedom.

²Hillary Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 1987), 84–85.