

CHILDREN PLAY WITH GOD:
A Contemporary Thomistic Understanding of the Child¹

“Children are told not to play with fire; they play with God.”

-- Jacques Maritain

Introduction

Jacques Maritain stands out among recent Catholic thinkers for the breadth of his interests. God and angels, nature and art, liturgy and contemplation, sign and signified, individual and person, man and the state, and, yes, the child were the subjects of Maritain’s penetrating philosophical gaze. Maritain identified himself as a Thomist, explaining that “[o]ne is a Thomist because one has repudiated every attempt to find philosophical truth in any system fabricated by an individual . . . and because one wants to seek out what is true – for oneself, indeed, and by one’s own reason – by allowing oneself to be taught by the whole range of human thought, in order not to neglect anything of that which is.”² As one commentator has observed, Jacques Maritain is “the philosopher of *all that is*.”³ That Maritain constitutes an exception to the general neglect on the part of Catholic and other thinkers in considering what the child is, then, is not an accident.⁴

Considering the child, Maritain discovers a person, a person who, just as every other rational person Maritain acknowledges, must actually become who he potentially is. “According to a commonplace expression, which is a very profound one, man must become what he is. In the moral order, he must win, by himself, his freedom and his personality.”⁵ What Maritain says of the human person in general is writ-large of the

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² Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), xiii.

³ “Maritain ever remains a philosopher of *all that is*, of God and nature, of logic and metaphysics, of mathematics and art, and, yes, of man and the state” (James V. Schall, *Jacques Maritain: The Philosopher in Society* [Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998], 225).

⁴ Maritain constitutes an exception to the appearance that “Catholicism does not have a *developed* teaching on what children are” (Todd David Whitmore with Tobias Winright, “Children: An Undeveloped Theme in Catholic Teaching,” in Maura A. Ryan and Todd David Whitmore, *The Challenge of Global Stewardship: Roman Catholic Responses* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997], 161).

⁵ Jacques Maritain, *Scholasticism and Politics*, 3d ed. (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1954), 52.

small child: “As to the human person, he is but a person in embryo.”⁶ The winning of personality and freedom begins, if it does, in the “first act of freedom,” an act of which the child is capable as soon as he realizes, perhaps unconsciously, the difference between what is good and what is bad. In the “first act of freedom,” the child chooses the good *because* it is good. This first act of freedom is not only chronologically prior to, but exemplary of any subsequent acts of freedom, that is, of winning personality and freedom. Although childhood is surely a period of development, already children play with God.⁷

Before unfolding Maritain’s rich account of the child, a word about the choice of Maritain as guide to the child may be advisable. In some circles, “pre-Vatican II Thomism” is passé, or worse; for even receptive minds find that Scholastic categories, definitions, and distinctions make unusual demands on contemporary readers. Maritain does not make the going any easier. Maritain is not a parrot of inherited scholastic formulae, however; indeed, Maritain’s is a thoroughly up-to-date mind, fully engaged in the contemporary problematics and urgent problems of modern man. The perennial questions framed and transmitted by some of the great historical figures studied elsewhere in this volume, and Thomas Aquinas above all, find contemporary expression, development, application, and even correction in the writings of Maritain. There is value in exploring how a more or less contemporary Thomist understands the child. There is additional value in seeing how the philosopher who more than any other influenced the social teaching of the Second Vatican Council thinks about the child. Beyond or before these archaeological reasons, I would submit this reason, on Maritain’s behalf: Who and what “the child of man is” matters. It matters who she is called to be, and how she, with help both natural and supernatural, is to realize that potential. Not wanting anyone to take his word for anything, Maritain would ask exactly the following of the reader: “Is what I say true?”

The pages ahead fall into four Parts. In Part I, we begin where Maritain begins, with the act of existence. In Maritain’s judgment, everything that is, is part of a going forth from Being Itself, which is God, and it falls to every person, including the child, to use his created freedom to decide whether to be a part of that great wave of being, or to block the divine generosity through sin. Part II articulates the “first act of freedom,” which is at once the child’s and the man’s. Part III considers the education the child needs if she is to begin to win her personality and freedom; it is, above all else, an education into his or her own essentially good tendencies or, in other words, the natural law. Part IV, finally, recognizes the place of the child, first, in the family and, second, in the economy of divine grace. By nature, the child is part of family society. By super-nature, like it or not, the child plays with God. The very act by which an adult includes

⁶ Ibid., 107.

⁷ This was the theme of the homily delivered by Joachim Cardinal Meisner at World Youth Day 2005 in Cologne: “Each one of us has one life. There is no ‘trial’ period that is exempt from responsibility. Consequently, there is no life, love, faith or death that can be tested. We are always at a state of emergency. We always have full responsibility.” Available at www.vatican.va/gmg/documents/gmg_2005_20050816_opening-card-meisner_en.html.

himself in or excludes himself from God's will that all be saved, is performed first, and exemplarily, by the child.

Part I: "The Gushing Forth of the Act of Existence"

'Existentialism' is Maritain's preferred shorthand for the Thomist philosophy, and he uses it as something of a corrective of a failure by some to appreciate "the dynamic aspect of the thought of St. Thomas."⁸ Maritain acknowledged that the term brings to the modern mind the ideas of Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, which amount, in Maritain's judgment, to a "transcendental embezzlement."⁹ The word needed re-capturing and "reclaiming"¹⁰ by Thomists because, according to Maritain, they have a "prior right"¹¹ to it. For, as Maritain says in language that bears no trace of the brittle Latin of the textbook Thomist tradition with which Maritain is sometimes wrongly associated:

At this point appears an aspect of Thomism which is in my opinion of first importance. By the very fact that the metaphysics of St. Thomas is centered, not upon essences but upon existence – upon the mysterious gushing forth of the act of existing in which, according to the analogical variety of the degrees of being, qualities and natures are actualised and formed, which qualities and natures refract and multiply the transcendent unity of subsistent Being itself in its created participations – this metaphysics lays hold, at its very starting point, of being as superabundant. Being superabounds, everywhere; it scatters its gifts and fruits in profusion. This is the action in which all beings here below communicate with one another and in which, thanks to the divine influx that traverses them, they are at every instant – in this world of contingent existence and of unforeseeable future contingents – either better or worse than themselves and than the mere fact of their existence at a given moment. By this action they exchange their secrets, influence one another for good or ill, and contribute to or betray in one another the fecundity of being, the while they are carried along despite themselves in the torrent of divine governance from which nothing can escape.

Above time, in the primary and transcendent Source, it is the superabundance of the divine act of existing, superabundance in pure act, which manifests itself in God Himself (as revelation teaches us) by the

⁸ Maritain, *Scholasticism and Politics*, 106.

⁹ Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, trans. Lewis Galantieri and Gerald B. Phelan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1948), 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

plurality of the divine Persons, and (as reason is of itself qualified to know) by the fact that the very existence of God is Intelligence and is Love, and by the fact that this existence is freely creative. Moreover this divine plenitude does not merely give, it gives itself. And it was, in the last analysis, in order to give itself to spiritual beings apt to receive it that, specifically, it created the world.¹²

Good Aristotelians that they are, Thomists affirm that every natural kind is what it is because of its essence, its specific organizing principle. There will be much to say about the human essence and how it is known, but first, following Maritain's lead, we linger over the act of existence. To jump too quickly to essences can obscure the *ne-plus-ultra* point that whether an essence exists, or fails to exist, *makes all the difference*. Not satisfied with a mere "philosophy of essences," a "thumbing through a picture-book," Maritain presses for a "philosophy of existence and existential realism."¹³

That philosophy affirms that all the things of creation "are permeated by the activating influx of the Prime Cause." Because of this, things "ceaselessly pass beyond themselves, and give more than they have."¹⁴ Maritain's embrace of existence is nothing short of lyrical, and in this lies a clue to direction of the entire philosophy. The philosophy that recognizes and celebrates the primacy of *the act of existence* is at the same time a philosophy of the *good*. As Maritain says in language resonant with the whole Thomist tradition: "Every thing is good to the extent that it is, that it has *esse* [being]. Being and the good are convertible notions."¹⁵ That which exists, is good. This existing world of creation is the going forth of being from Subsistent Being, the person of God, and it abounds and superabounds according to God's universal governance, the Eternal Law, and this is all very *good*. Except where angels and persons are concerned, this is the simple and glorious end to the story.

Where persons – and angels, though they are not our current focus – are concerned, the story depends on the right exercise of freedom. The human person can block being's going forth from God and increase! Maritain explains that the going forth from the First Cause of being and goodness could have been an "unshatterable impulse," an overflowing that is "infallibly efficacious" in its increase of being. In actual fact, however, the First Cause has allowed the possibility that this impulse be shattered and rendered inefficacious. The human person, like the angelic person, can stop the increase of being, and thereby goodness, by acting not in conformity with his essence. When the person acts thus, he acts alone; he puts

¹² Ibid., 42-43.

¹³ Ibid., 2.

¹⁴ Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1953), 127.

¹⁵ Jacques Maritain, *An Introduction to the Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*, trans. Cornelia N. Borgerhoff (Albany, N.Y.: Magi Books, Inc., 1990), 32-33.

an absence at the head of its acting, [thus] introduc[ing] the condition which will cause the texture of being to give way; that is why there will be faultiness now that it acts with that voluntary non-consideration; such an act will bear in itself the teeth-marks of nothingness.

Were we to put that into picturesque present-day language, we should say, in trying to express this initiative of non-being, this initiative of absence on which I have on which I have placed so much emphasis, -- we should say that the will *nihilates*, that it *noughts*; it has an initiative, yet we can only translate that initiative by words which express action. But it is an initiative of non-action: we must therefore necessarily have recourse to a paradoxical language and say that created will then “does nothingness,” “makes non-being;” and this is all it can do by itself. . . . It “makes” non-being, that is to say that in all freedom it undoes, or it non-does, or it noughts; the creature slinks, not by an action but by a free non-action or dis-action, from the influx of the First Cause, -- which influx is loaded with being and goodness – it slinks from it insofar as this influx reaches the free region as such, it renders this influx sterile, it *nihilates* it.¹⁶

Conversely, when the free agent does not nihilate, but instead acts in conformity with his or her essence, and thus leaves the divine impulse unshattered, it is the First Cause who is at work through and in human freedom:

[W]hat it is important to set forth here with unmistakable clarity is that the created existent contributes nothing of its own, does nothing, adds nothing, gives nothing – not the shadow of an action or of a determination coming from it – which would make of the shatterable impulse an unshatterable impetus or an impetus that comes to grips with existence. Not to nihilate under the divine activation, not to sterilise that impetus, not to have the initiative of making the thing we call nothing, does not mean taking the initiative, or the demi-initiative, or the smallest fraction of the initiative of an act; it does not mean acting on one’s own to complete, in any way whatever, the divine activation. It means not stirring under its touch, but allowing it free passage, allowing it to bear its fruit (the unshatterable activation) by virtue of which the will (which did not nihilate in the first instance) will act (will look at the rule efficaciously) in the very exercise of its domination over its motives, and will burst forth freely in a good option and a good act.

To allow the shatterable impetus free passage is to let it fructify of itself and disappear into the unshatterable impetus by virtue of which the good act is produced, namely the rule efficaciously regarded in the very act of option.¹⁷

¹⁶ Jacques Maritain, *Saint Thomas and the Problem of Evil* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1942), 33-34.

¹⁷ Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, 99-100, 100 n. 10.

In sum, according to Maritain, the First Cause is the sole generative cause of the increase of being and goodness, and, if we can say that being and goodness come from the human creature as a *second* cause, the only condition on the side of the creature is its “having done nothing by its first initiative as nihilating first cause.”¹⁸ The person’s freely non-nihilating satisfies a condition of the shatterable impulse’s reaching its fructification.¹⁹ This is the existential metaphysics according to which the person would become in actuality what he or she already is in potency or -- in that memorable phrase -- “in embryo.”

Before going into more detail, it might be helpful to observe that, with this metaphysics, Maritain anticipatorily exorcises every ghost of Pelagius, every spectre of Molina. From the theological perspective, which we shall explore in Part IV, Maritain explains that while “God does not refuse His grace to one who acts to the best of his ability,” a proposition that flirts with heresy, “it is under the action of grace that man prepares to receive grace,”²⁰ an affirmation that assures orthodoxy. Maritain’s philosophy and his Catholic theology to which it is always “subalternated” assure that, whatever the vocation or office of the child, or of the man, it is not in any way to be the cause of one’s own or anything’s goodness. Occasionally, when speaking in passing, or in describing the rigors of the moral life (a topic of Part III), Maritain might give the impression that man is somehow a co-cause of being and goodness, but his considered and foundational view is that all being and goodness go forth from Subsistent Being as cause, with the created, rational agents’ part being only, but freely, not to block that going forth. Man can nihilate, only God can create being and goodness.

Part II: To Win Personality and Freedom of Independence

From the essence of the human person comes the potential freely to win the full stature of personhood or personality. *Personality* or *personhood*, what it is to be a *person*, is among the most important concepts in Maritain’s philosophy, and by it he means something quite precise and distinctive (and only approximately related to the notions of personhood developed by the philosophies of “personalism” that came later). Maritain distinguishes between two metaphysical aspects of the unified reality that is the human being or, simply, “the person.” Under one aspect, a person is an “individual,” by which Maritain means “a simple power of receptivity and of substantial mutability, an avidity for being.”²¹ It is the material aspect of the person, but “the word matter designates here, not a concept used in physics, but in philosophy: that of the *materia prima*, pure potentiality, able neither to *be* nor to *be thought* by itself, and from which all corporeal beings are made.”²² Under the second aspect, the same person is properly a

¹⁸ Ibid., 101 n. 10.

¹⁹ Ibid., 99 n. 9.

²⁰ Jacques Maritain, *The Range of Reason* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1952), 74.

²¹ Maritain, *Scholasticism and Politics*, 48.

²² Ibid.

person, that is, by virtue of what he receives not from matter but “from spirit.”²³
Personality “is a great metaphysical mystery.”²⁴

What do we mean precisely when we speak of the human person? When we say that a man is a person, we do not mean merely that he is an individual, in the sense that an atom, a blade of grass, a fly, or an elephant is an individual. Man is an individual who holds himself in hand by his intelligence and his will; he exists not merely in a physical fashion. He has spiritual superexistence through knowledge and love, so that he is, in a way, a universe in himself, a microcosmos, in which the great universe in its entirety can be encompassed through knowledge. By love he can give himself completely to beings who are to him, as it were, other selves. . . . Spirit is the root of personality. . . . To say that a man is a person is to say that in the depths of his being he is more a whole than a part and more independent than servile. It is to say that he is a minute fragment of matter that is at the same time a universe, a beggar who participates in the absolute being, mortal flesh whose value is eternal, and a bit of straw into which heaven enters.²⁵

Here we are at the heart of the matter: “[M]an must complete, through his own will, what is sketched,” but only sketched, “in his nature” as a person.²⁶ Unconstrained all the way down in our metaphysical root, we must win our freedom and personality. On the other hand, “[e]vil arises when, in our action, we give preponderance to the individual aspect of our being. For although each of our acts is simultaneously the act of ourselves as an individual and as a person, yet, by the very fact that it is free and involves our whole being, each act is linked in a movement towards the supreme center to which personality tends, or in a movement towards that dispersion into which, if left to itself, material individuality is inclined to fall.”²⁷ We win our personality, we win our “freedom of independence” by becoming masters of our own actions, by freely choosing to become the persons we can be:

In each of us personality and freedom of independence increase together. For man is a being in movement. If he does not augment, he has nothing, and he loses what he had; he must fight for his being. The entire history of his fortunes and misfortunes is the history of his effort to win, together with his own personality, freedom of independence. He is called to the conquest of freedom.²⁸

²³ Ibid., 52.

²⁴ Jacques Maritain, *The Education of Man* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967), 164.

²⁵ Ibid., 163-64.

²⁶ Maritain, *Scholasticism and Politics*, 52.

²⁷ Jacques Maritain, *The Person and The Common Good*, trans. John J. Fitzgerald (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press), 43-44.

²⁸ Maritain, *Education of Man*, 165.

The human person is a person only in embryo – and he is “called” to win his freedom of independence and the personality that are rightly his.

And it all begins, if it does begin, in childhood, at the instant when, at some, probably unspectacular and perhaps even unmemorable moment, the child for the first time decides about the direction of his life by choosing to do what is good *because* it is good, that is, to do what is necessary to win his personality. This act, “the first act of freedom,” is, “in a moral sense, an absolute beginning.”²⁹ It is, moreover, “a moral act par excellence.”³⁰

The child, Maritain explains, has from his earliest days engaged in many acts “in which freedom was not lacking,” but prior to the decisive “first act of freedom,” for “the part played by freedom was inchoate and superficial.” In the “*primal* free act,” the child, having reached the age at which he can reason about himself,

takes himself in hand; he frees or delivers his own self from the deterministic crust under which he had lived until that moment; he ushers himself into the universe of moral life by freely deciding about the direction of his life. At the root of such an act there is a reflection upon oneself which takes place in the intellect and answers the question: “What do you live for?” Yet this reflection is not explicitly signified to the mind, and the question which it answers is not formulated in clear concepts. This question, on the contrary, is altogether engaged and involved in a choice whose immediate object may be a bit of straw, a trifle, but which is pregnant with a spiritual vitality, a decisive earnestness, a commitment, a gift of oneself the plenitude of which will not be experienced by adult age except in rare and miraculous occasions. *Puerile decus*. Children are told not to play with fire; they play with God.³¹

What Maritain has in mind -- and revels in -- is the “root-act” by which the person, first and exemplarily as child, commits himself to that for which his freedom of choice has been given him, that is, to win personality, the freedom of independence that consists in doing and pursuing what is *good* for human persons.³²

There is more to say about this, but one must immediately add, as Maritain does, that a given act of commitment to seek the good *qua* good by no means ensures a bright future. The child “has decided about the direction of his life insofar as an act of the human will, exercised in time, can bind the future: that is to say in a fragile way. He is not forever confirmed in his decision; throughout his life he will be able to change his decision concerning his last end and the direction of his life, but by just as deep an act of freedom and of deliberation about himself.”³³ In that first act of freedom, whenever and

²⁹ Maritain, *The Range of Reason*, 66.

³⁰ Maritain, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 141.

³¹ Maritain, *Range of Reason*, 66-67.

³² *Ibid.*, 66.

³³ *Ibid.*, 67. See also *Ibid.*, 83.

however often it occurs, the person “goes down to the sources of [his] moral life,”³⁴ and this because he recognizes, however dimly, that his freedom is to be ordered according to the personhood that is his only in embryo.

But from this implication of the first act of freedom, Maritain draws another, and it is decisive. The first act of freedom, which is a “*moral act par excellence*,” is moreover, “at least implicitly, a religious act, since it can only be realized rightly if it is realized in divine charity, whether the subject knows it or not.”³⁵ Maritain elaborates that, by freely committing himself to the good and pursuit of its specific instances, the child commits himself, though he need not know it, to what the philosopher calls “Goodness itself,” which is what the theologian knows to be God.

The initial act which determines the direction of life and which – when it is good – chooses the good for the sake of the good, proceeds from a natural élan which is also, undividedly, an élan by which this very same act tends all at once, beyond its immediate object, toward God as the Separate Good in which the human person in the process of acting, whether he is aware of it or not, places his happiness and his end.³⁶

This is radical doctrine, especially as one turns the page and discovers that Maritain goes on to clarify that in this act personal salvation is won, the person’s redemption made effective. Yes, according to Maritain, there is no salvation without faith, and no faith without grace; but, in the person exercising the primal act of freedom for the good, Maritain finds the grace of faith at work.³⁷ We return to the workings of grace below, in Part IV, recalling the while that the first act of freedom is necessarily, “at least implicitly, a religious act” because it is realized in divine charity. For Maritain, there is no winning of freedom and personality without grace and charity, and yet the conquest is an act of which every rational person – with a possible exception to be noted at the end – is capable.

Here I would underline that it is Maritain’s judgment that what the child does is the *type* of what a person, of whatever age, does if he or she is winning her freedom and personality: “Every time a man pulls himself together in order to think out his last end and to decide his destiny, he is in some sense back again at the absolute beginnings that mark the child.”³⁸ Indeed, according to Maritain, a person’s adult ability to grow in freedom may be in part a function of how he or she as a child responded to that first question about whether to the good because of its goodness: “Adults are usually inclined to make light of childhood. They forget that their world of reason, civilized and corrupt, depends in awful measure on the intuitive and tempestuous life of childhood and that the most important decisions which control their existence, and which they may have

³⁴ Ibid., 66.

³⁵ Maritain, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 141.

³⁶ Maritain, *Range of Reason*, 69.

³⁷ See Ibid., 75-85.

³⁸ Jacques Maritain, “The Philosophy of Freedom,” chap. 1 in *Integral Humanism, Freedom in the Modern World, and A Letter on Independence* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 11.

forgotten, have most often been taken in the course of their life as children.”³⁹ Maritain’s child is, in a strong sense, father to the man.

Part III. Education and “the Internal Principle”

A pervasive theme in Maritain’s work is the *difficulty* of the moral task set before the human person. Over and over, if with different emphases and diverse tones, Maritain laments that the process of winning one’s personality and freedom involves “a sorrowful cost and . . . formidable risks.”⁴⁰ It is only “through constant effort and struggle” that a person can win his personality and freedom of independence.⁴¹ One commentator, with an especially keen insight into the texture of the moral universe as understood by Maritain, notes that “What is said to be ‘natural’ seems uncommonly difficult to attain by ordinary means --”⁴² even, one might add, with the help of supernatural grace.

The difficulty of the task, combined with the fact that nothing less than the point of man’s existence is ineluctably at stake, leads Maritain to discern a stunning importance in education. One can hardly read Maritain without being impressed, if not frightened, by the importance he attaches to a child’s having the right kind of education. Maritain of course acknowledges that the child will need to learn how to add and subtract and so forth, and in his many writings on education he enters into surprisingly much detail about curricula and the like. Maritain is fond of touting the virtues of liberal education, but “he is much more fond of featuring the child who is being liberated through education.”⁴³ What leaps off the page is Maritain’s judgment that the young person needs to be educated into how to be a person, into how to win his personality and freedom of independence. It is instructive that Maritain raises the topic and exigence of education, among other places, immediately after delving into the difficulty of the person’s following the “slope of personality” rather than the destructive “slope of individuality.”⁴⁴ Education is a “crucial problem”⁴⁵ because without it, according to Maritain, the child will have no chance of mastering the means by which alone personality can be won. Every child is needful of a pedagogy into freedom; therefore, education itself “needs primarily to know what man is.”⁴⁶ The program is clear: “The prime goal of education is the conquest of internal and spiritual freedom to be achieved by the individual person.”⁴⁷

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Maritain, *Person and the Common Good*, 44.

⁴¹ Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1971), 11.

⁴² Schall, 146.

⁴³ Joseph W. Evans, *Jaques Maritain: The Man and His Achievement* (New York: Seed and Ward, 1963), 201.

⁴⁴ Maritain, *Scholasticism and Politics*, 52. See also Maritain, *Person and the Common Good*, 44-45.

⁴⁵ Maritain, *Scholasticism and Politics*, 53.

⁴⁶ Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, 5.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 11.

One, more concrete, way of describing the goal of education is this: to develop the person's essentially good tendencies.⁴⁸ To be sure, the task of the moral life is arduous, because we are the heirs to the consequences of Adam's fall. It is Maritain's view, however, that, *pace* Luther and Calvin, our human nature is wounded, but it is not thoroughly corrupted: "our nature, certainly not corrupted in its essence, but weakened (by) those profound impairments which are called wounds."⁴⁹ Or again: "Man is not born free *save in the basic potencies of his being*: he becomes free, by warring upon himself and thanks to many sorrows. . . ."⁵⁰ Paradoxically, post-lapsarian man *is* born free in his basic potencies; however, the inherited consequences of the fall, as well as any personal sin with which a person may encrust himself, ensure a severe labor as the price of the freedom of independence, and make an education into the person that he already is in embryo exigent. "The basic principle underlying Maritain's educational thought is that a person is to be liberated by fostering the most basic human dispositions. Rooting out dispositions which enslave people is important also; but Maritain is confident that the best means for achieving that is by fostering the good dispositions."⁵¹ As Maritain sees it, the worthy education of which the child is in need will be an education into who by the integral dynamism of nature and supernature she is called to become.

We can begin to unpack what Maritain would have the educator do for the child by recovering and developing the concept of "essence" or "nature" that we introduced at the outset but have yet fully to explore. As we saw, Maritain understands the point of creation to be the going forth and increase of being and goodness. Thomist existentialism emphatically is not, however, "a philosophy of pure becoming;"⁵² being is differentiated according to the range of natural kinds. As is obvious, different kinds of things exist. A thing's nature or essence specifies what is and what it is to become; it specifies, in other words, what is *good* for it to be or to do. This "normality of functioning," as Maritain calls it, is at the same time this specific natural kind's "natural law." Moreover, "[a]ny kind of thing existing in nature, a plant, a dog, a horse, has its own natural law, that is, the normality of its functioning, the proper way in which, by reason of its specific structure and specific ends, it 'should' achieve fullness of being either in its growth or in its behavior."⁵³ Man, like every other thing in the natural order, has an essence or nature.

[P]ossessed of a nature, being constituted in a given, determinate fashion, man obviously possesses ends which correspond to his natural constitution and which are the same for all – as all pianos, for instance, whatever their particular type and in whatever spot they may be, have as their end the production of certain attuned sounds. If they don't produce those sounds they must be tuned, or discarded as worthless. But since man is endowed with intelligence and determines his own ends, it is up to him to put

⁴⁸ See Edith Weaver Schell, "Some Educational Implications of Jacques Maritain's Theory of the Nature of Man and of the Knowledge Process" (master's thesis, Loyola College, 1958).

⁴⁹ Translation of Maritain taken from Schell, 154.

⁵⁰ Maritain, *Education of Man*, 168 (emphasis added).

⁵¹ James E. Hug, "Moral Judgment: The Theory and the Practice in the Thought of Jacques Maritain" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1980), 100.

⁵² Maritain, *Education of Man*, 162.

⁵³ Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 87.

himself in tune with the ends necessarily demanded by his nature. This means that there is by virtue of human nature, *an order or a disposition which human reason can discover and according to which the human will must act in order to attune itself to the necessary ends of the human being. The unwritten law, or natural law, is nothing more than that.*⁵⁴

In the case of man, his ends include life at the biological level, for without satisfying the conditions of nutrition and growth, he cannot meet the conditions of his higher end, which is to reduce his individuality so that his personality might expand.

The specific ends or goods that the person *ought* seek constitute, in Maritain's idiom, the natural law in its *ontological element*. Maritain introduces this locution to help distinguish the natural law in its *gnoseological element*, that is, the natural law in the mode by which it is known. Human persons know some things by way of reason and concepts; for example the meaning of a statute or the content of the law of nations. But some knowledge enters by way of what Maritain refers to as connaturality. Connatural knowledge – by which, for example, the musician knows the musical, the poet the poetical, and the mystic the mystical – is “implicit and preconscious and . . . advances, not by mode of reason or concepts, but by the mode of inclination.”⁵⁵ Not of just any inclination, however. Maritain distinguishes inclinations that come from instincts rooted in humankind's animal nature from those that “issu[e] from reason or from the rational nature of man.”⁵⁶ The latter inclinations, Maritain explains,

presuppose the instinctive inclinations – for example, the animal instinct to procreate for the survival of the species – let us say more generally that they presuppose the tendencies impressed in the ontological structure of the human being. But they also presuppose that these tendencies and instinctive inclinations have been grasped and transferred into the dynamism of the intellect's field of apprehension and the sphere of human nature where it is most typically itself, that is, as endowed and imbued with reason. They are a specifically new recasting, a transmutation or recreation of these tendencies and instinctive inclinations which originates in the intellect or reason as the “form” of man's interior universe Here are inclinations which are properly *human*, even if they concern the animal realm. Nature has passed through the lake of Intellect (functioning unconsciously). The element which fixes these inclinations is not an ontological or instinctive structure, a “building code,” but rather the object of an (unformulated) view of the intellect, let us say certain essential ends perceived or anticipated in a non-conceptual or preconscious way.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Jacques Maritain, *The Rights of Man and Natural Law*, trans. Doris C. Anson (New York: Gordian Press, 1971), 60-61.

⁵⁵ Maritain, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 53.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

This knowledge is by “intuition.” Intuitive knowledge, which, for Maritain, is a category broader than and inclusive of “connatural knowledge,” is direct and immediate.⁵⁸

If the reader will forgive the uncouth mouthful made necessary by Maritain’s neologizing, one can say that a person’s intuitive knowing of the natural law in its ontological element through the connatural mode of inclination is the natural law in its gnoseological element. The knowledge most necessary for a person to become in reality what he or she is in potency is reached connaturally through inclination:

The genuine concept of Natural Law is the concept of a law which is natural not only insofar as it expresses the normality of functioning of human nature, but also insofar as it is *naturally* known, that is, known through inclination or through connaturality, not through conceptual knowledge and by way of reasoning. . . . My contention is that the judgments in which Natural Law is made manifest to practical Reason do not proceed from any conceptual, discursive, rational exercise of reason; they proceed from that *connaturality* or *congeniality* through which what is consonant with the essential inclinations of human nature is grasped by the intellect as good; what is dissonant, as bad.⁵⁹

Some readers have criticized in general Maritain’s theory of intuitive knowledge; others have focused their objection on his theory of connatural knowledge, especially as it concerns the natural law. Still others have embraced Maritain’s connatural theory of the natural law, appreciating it especially for liberating from the bonds of rationalism the means by which a human being discerns his or her own ends

That knowledge of who are to become enters, if at all, connaturally has decisive consequences for education, especially education of the child. Because the primary end of education is the introduction of the child to the freedom by which he can win his personality, and because the knowledge necessary for that is pre-conceptual, connatural, and by way of inclination, the teacher’s art will be to encourage the conditions in which the child can, in an age appropriate way, put himself in tune with his essential inclinations and, then, again in age-appropriate way, begin to turn this pre-rational knowledge into developing intellectual, moral knowledge. The educator’s role is not merely to make the child free to trust himself, of course. It is the far more demanding one of possessing such sensitivity and discernment of the workings of the child’s mind that he can penetrate those and then present the experiences and tools that will allow the child to progress in attuning himself to his essential inclinations.⁶⁰ This is an art in which the teacher can hardly be trained, yet without this sensitivity the teacher will fail to meet the child at the place where growth toward freedom can occur:

⁵⁸ See Maritain, *Range of Reason*, 22-27. See also Jacques Maritain, *A Preface to Metaphysics* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1948), 50-51.

⁵⁹ Maritain, *Range of Reason*, 26-27.

⁶⁰ Schell, 161.

[I]f the teacher keeps in view above all the inner center of vitality at work in the preconscious depths of the life of the intelligence, he may center the acquisition of knowledge and solid formation of the mind on the freeing of the child's and the youth's intuitive power.⁶¹

It is a paradox of this primary education of which the young person is needful that what is most essential – the intuition by which he knows connaturally – cannot be inculcated. The paradox is not a cul-de-sac. The teacher can encourage five basic human dispositions, which include 1) love of truth, 2) love of good and justice, 3) a free contemplative openness to reality, 4) a sense of responsible engagement with it, and 5) a sense of cooperation.⁶²

The process by which this occurs is a complex one, of which one element merits singling out here. One way -- indeed, though we mentioned it in passing, in quoting Maritain's description of the metaphysical mystery of personality⁶³ -- the privileged way of describing the person who is winning her personality and freedom is that she is becoming a lover. In this regard, "[m]an's perfection consists of the perfection of love, and so is less the perfection of his 'self' than the perfection of his love, where the very self is in some measure lost sight of."⁶⁴ To love what is worthy, is the mark of the person possessed of his freedom, and in aid of this,

what is of most importance in educators themselves is a respect for the soul as well as for the body of the child, the sense of his innermost essence and his internal resources, and a sort of sacred and loving attention to his mysterious identity, which is a hidden thing that no techniques can reach. And what matters most in the educational enterprise is a perpetual appeal to intelligence and free will in the young.⁶⁵

Those who know and care about the particular child are best able to impart the loving attention he or she wants. In this manner, "[l]ove does not regard ideas or abstractions or possibilities, love regards existing persons,"⁶⁶ and ordinarily it is in the family that the child will learn love and, consequently, how to become a lover, of God and of neighbor.

Whether in the family, or in school or Church with both of which responsibility to educate the child is shared⁶⁷, the educator faces a freedom that is only incipiently

⁶¹ Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, 43 (discussed in Schell at 162).

⁶² *Ibid.*, 36-38. See also Hug, 100.

⁶³ See *supra* at <>

⁶⁴ Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, 36.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁶⁷ The sharing of this responsibility with the school is contingent, for sometimes schools will not be established or parents will not elect to use them. The Church, by contrast, exists now necessarily, and has a mandate to teach the child the secrets of the faith and to introduce the child into the sacramental economy; the Church has a claim on the child, though the Church will not exercise this claim against the will of the parents.

developed because the child's reason has only begun to be developed.⁶⁸ In adolescence, "judgment and intellectual strength are developing,"⁶⁹ but, according to Maritain, "[t]he universe of a child is the universe of imagination."⁷⁰ Maritain advises that "[in] his task of civilizing the child's mind," the educator

must progressively tame the imagination to the rule of reason, whilst ever remembering that the proportionally tremendous work of the child's intellect, endeavoring to grasp the external world, is accomplished under the vital and perfectly normal rule of imagination.

I should like to add that beauty is the mental atmosphere and the inspiring power fitted to a child's education, and should be, so to speak, the continuous quickening and spiritualizing contrapuntal base of that education. Beauty makes intelligibility pass unawares through sense-awareness. It is by virtue of the allure of beautiful things and deeds and ideas that the child is to be led and awakened to intellectual and moral life.⁷¹

Maritain adds that occasionally "the vitality and intuitiveness" of the spirit at work in the child pierce the world of imagination with flashes of intelligence that enjoys "lucid freedom," while on other occasions, according to Maritain, "immature workings of instinct and the violence of nature make him capable of intense resentment, wickedness, and manifold perversion."⁷²

In sum, Maritain understands education to be an art, the art whereby the person is helped to become in actuality what he is in potency. The teacher is an artist, a co-operator with nature: "the principal agent in education, the primary dynamic factor or propelling force, is the internal vital principle in the one to be educated; the educator or teacher is only the secondary – though a genuinely effective – dynamic factor and a ministerial agent."⁷³ Maritain elaborates:

In reality, what is especially important for the education and the progress of the human being, in the moral and spiritual order (as well as in the order of organic growth), is the interior principle, that is to say, nature and grace. The right educational means are but auxiliaries; the art, a co-operating art, at the service of this interior principle. And the entire art consists in cutting off and in pruning – both in the case of the person, and of the individual – so that, in the intimacy of our being, the weight of

⁶⁸ Ibid., 33.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 61.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 60.

⁷¹ Ibid., 60-61.

⁷² Ibid., 61.

⁷³ Ibid., 31.

individuality should diminish, and that of real personality and of its generosity, should increase. And this, indeed, is far from easy.⁷⁴

The education that Maritain judges necessary has as an aim the increase of the learner's knowledge, but it also includes as a coordinate aim the strengthening of the will. Maritain's understanding of the fundamental purposes of education even lead him to attach to affirm the priority of shaping of the learner's will: Without an effective and affective will for the good, what knowledge we acquire will be for naught.⁷⁵

Withal, what matters above all is the moment of that first act, when the child takes himself in hand and freely chooses the good for what it is, and thus begins to win his personality.

IV The Graced Life of the Child (in the Family)

The picture of the child painted so far is incomplete in two ways. Filling up the detail will reveal more of the child's place in the family, the family's (and thus the child's) place in the world, grace's operation in nature, and the destiny of children who with God's grace has chosen the good in the first act of freedom. Mention must also be made of Limbo.

Maritain does not assign parents the role of primary educator of the child merely on the supposed, contingent ground that children are infallibly loved in the family. Maritain is a realist: "The history of the family, all through the centuries, is no prettier than any human history."⁷⁶ Sometimes orphanages and boarding schools do better, and, in the extreme case, Maritain anticipates that either the state or societies coordinate with the family will by right take over the responsibility in which the family has failed. In the first instance, however, it is *by nature* that the child belongs in the family. The emergent view today is that "the law creates the family, and things could not be otherwise."⁷⁷ Maritain is so old-fashioned to think that the family is not the contingent legal creation of the state, but rather *the creation of nature*, in a "rough-hewn" way that awaits development.⁷⁸ "What I maintain," Maritain records,

is that nature exists and nothing can get rid of nature. There are freaks in nature; then exceptional measures must be taken. But let us speak of what happens as a rule. Even at the most mediocre average level, nature at play in family life has its own spontaneous ways of compensating after a fashion for its own failures, its own spontaneous processes of self-

⁷⁴ Maritain, *Scholasticism and Politics*, 53-54.

⁷⁵ "[T]he shaping of the will is throughout more important to man than the shaping of the intellect," (Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, 22).

⁷⁶ Maritain, *Education of Man*, 119.

⁷⁷ James G. Dwyer, *Spiritual Treatment Exemptions to Child Medical Neglect Law: What We Outsiders Should Think*, 76 *Notre Dame Law Rev* 147, 167 (2000).

⁷⁸ Maritain, *Man and the State*, 4.

regulation, which nothing can replace, and provides the child with a moral formation and an experience of mutual love, however deficient it may be, which nothing can replace. Many birds fall from the nest. It would be nonsense to undertake to destroy all the nests fairly well prepared by mother-birds, and to furnish the forests of the world with better-conditioned artificial nests, and improved cages.⁷⁹

Love ever remains the goal, and it enters not in utopian pristineness, but in the “daily love which pushes forward in the midst of slaps and kisses, . . . the normal fabric where the feelings and the will . . . of the child are naturally shaped. The society made by his parents, his brothers and sisters, is the primary human society and human environment in which . . . he becomes acquainted with love.”⁸⁰

By nature, as a rule, the family ensures the child’s best hope of experiencing and thus learning love, thereby beginning to win personality and freedom. Over and over again Maritain affirms that family is the creation of nature. “[I]t is an essential law of the nature of things . . . that the vitality and virtues of love develop first in the family.”⁸¹ Again: “No matter what deficiencies the family group may present in certain particular cases . . . , the nature [of the family] cannot be changed.”⁸² The examples could be multiplied, and individually and cumulatively they attest Maritain’s judgment that not only individual substances (such as persons or peaches) have their respective essential natures, but also some societies, of which the family is exemplary. Merely “rough-hewn” by nature, family society awaits development through reason and will.

Maritain’s frequent, unqualified invocations of “nature” and the “natural” can be misleading. Whenever the human person is implicated, Maritain’s references to “nature” and “the natural” presuppose the presence of grace. We come to the tasks that are naturally ours in an elevated way. *Human nature has always already been graced*. The relationship between nature and grace, and what it means for moral philosophy (as distinguished from moral theology), is a vast and complex topic in Maritain’s *corpus*, to the details of which he returned time and time again. For purposes of the present analysis, the main points are both clear and encouraging, in ways that anticipate, in some particulars at least, the hopeful theology developed in Anthony Kelly’s contribution to this volume.

A helpful angle on Maritain’s understanding of how grace has transformed the world of pure nature is his reaction to Greek ethics, and Aristotle’s in particular. Maritain took a conspicuously compassionate interest in the sad fate that befell most people in the ethical universe as comprehended by Aristotle. According to Aristotle, self-perfection required the right friends, therefore the right city, therefore the right laws, and so forth. Maritain even remarks critically on Aristotle’s excluding children from the possibility of virtue or moral self-perfection by limiting it, as Maritain says, to what is

⁷⁹ Maritain, *Education of Man*, 119.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 118-19.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁸² *Ibid.*

achievable “at the end of a long term, after long exercise, at a ripe age, when the hair is beginning to turn silver.”⁸³ Even prescinding from the striking Athenian elitism that marks Aristotle’s prognosis for people’s moral chances, Maritain is impressed (or depressed?) by how the consequences of an unmitigated or unameliorated ethical naturalism are, predictably, a lot of moral failures and mediocrities. Maritain himself is clear on the inevitable consequences of man’s having a nature that he may fail, either voluntarily or involuntarily, to live up to: “Men know [the natural law] with greater or less difficulty, and in different degrees, running the risk of error here as elsewhere.”⁸⁴

That, however, is not the last word. There is Good News. “The great novelty introduced by Christianity,” Maritain trumpets, “is this appeal to all, to free men and slaves, to the ignorant and the cultivated, adolescents and old men, a call to perfection which no effort of nature can attain but which is given by grace and consists in love, and from which therefore no one is excluded except by his own refusal.” And through this love, made possible by grace, a person is saved.

No one is excluded; not adolescents or old men, and certainly not the child – unless by one’s own refusal, in the first act of freedom. A failure at the natural level – because of ignorance, involuntary lack of opportunity, etc. – is no longer, as it was for Aristotle, the last word. According to Maritain, the human perfection that is love is offered to all people, through grace that, unless the person should opt out by nihilating, leads to salvation.

The *universalism* of God’s salvific is a strong current in Maritain’s thinking. The universalist *locus classicus*, 1 Timothy 2:4, where St. Paul’s assures his readers that “God wishes all men to be saved, and to come to knowledge of the truth,” is quoted and discussed by Maritain remarkably many times, and from his early writings through his very late ones. In his 1942 book *The Living Thoughts of St. Paul*, for example, Maritain offers this commentary on 1 Timothy 2:4:

There is therefore no predestination to perdition. But there is a predestination to glory, since it is by virtue of His eternal love, which precedes all merit on the creature’s part, that God saves all those who do not of themselves cut themselves off from His love, and whom He knows from all eternity, and whom the proveniences of His grace have abundantly filled.⁸⁵

In *Essence and the Existent*, for another example, published in 1948, Maritain parses 1 Timothy 2:4 in the very context of explaining how God allows man to nihilate without man’s becoming capable of causing being and goodness.⁸⁶ Most instructive is what Maritain said in a seminar to the Little Brothers of Jesus later published in *Notebooks*. There, Maritain argued vehemently against the proposition, which many in the Church

⁸³ Jacques Maritain, *Moral Philosophy* (New York, N.Y.: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1964), 33.

⁸⁴ Maritain, *Rights of Man and Natural Law*, 62.

⁸⁵ Jacques Maritain, *The Living Thoughts of Saint Paul* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1942), 142.

⁸⁶ Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, 100-103, n. 10-12.

inherited from Augustine, that the damned are many, the saved few.⁸⁷ The error, Maritain states, is to assimilate salvation to natural perfection. Natural perfection is indeed elusive, but “salvation is not . . . a summit of *natural perfection* which goes beyond the common state of nature, it is something entirely supernatural and which belongs to an order entirely different from that of nature. And the law of nature is not abolished by grace, but there is *another law*, proper to the supernatural order”⁸⁸ Without for a moment denying that humans can use their free will to frustrate God’s antecedent will that all be saved, Maritain registers a reason for concluding that theological opinion is, and should be, changing with respect to the number of the saved:

[T]he wounds of Original Sin have less efficacy to impair our nature than the wounds of Christ to elevate us by grace to friendship with the God who pardons.

I am persuaded that the idea of the *greater number of the chosen* imposes itself and will impose itself more and more on the Christian conscience. . . . On the one hand, there is God who “wills that all men be saved” and who sends His Son to redeem them by the death of the Cross. On the other hand, there is man who through the nihilations of which he is the first cause evades the love of God. Who can be persuaded that man through his evasions is *stronger* than God through His love? This does not exclude there being perhaps a great multitude in Hell, but it does mean that there is surely a much greater multitude in Paradise.⁸⁹⁹⁰

The Christological triumph that forms the heart of the movement chronicled in Fr. Kelly’s chapter here was anticipated and affirmed by Jacques Maritain.

Maritain’s unwavering affirmation that no one, except by his own choice, is excluded from salvation requires *either* that salvation be in some sense a natural occurrence, and thus common to all persons in virtue of their human nature, or that supernatural grace sufficient for salvation is offered to all who enjoy human nature. As the material quoted above reveals, Maritain follows the tradition in affirming that the order of nature is *toto caelo* different from the order of grace, but, as we have noted, his own theological opinion is that every human person is in fact graced. No one lives in pure nature, and in fact, according to Maritain, there is but one internal principle in every human, not two. Over and over Maritain refers, in the singular, to “the interior principle, namely, nature and grace.”⁹¹ Again, it is this *single* principle, Maritain insists, “which matters most in the education,”⁹² a fact to which we shall turn by way of noticing an apparent anomaly in Maritain’s theology of a universally graced human nature.

⁸⁷ See Fr. Harmless’s chapter in this volume.

⁸⁸ Jacques Maritain, *Notebooks*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (Albany, N.Y.: Magi Books, 1984), 270-71.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 271.

⁹⁰ On the “virtual distinction” between God’s antecedent and consequent will as concerns who gets saved, see Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, 101-02 n.10 and 11. See also Maritain, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 196.

⁹¹ Maritain, *Person and the Common Good*, 46. See also, e.g., Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, 41.

⁹² Maritain, *Person and the Common Good*, 46.

So convinced was he of the power of God's universal salvific will, Maritain speculated that Christ might save even the devil from the fires of hell. "No one leaves Hell," and certainly not the devil.⁹³ But the topography of hell is not uniform. In its nether reaches, the damned experience flames of wrath. In "the higher places of Hades"⁹⁴ there is Limbo. "The fire cannot touch it. . . . There is no desolation there, but well-ordered nature. . . . This is the land of Limbo, the land of natural happiness, where the soul does not see God face to face, and which, because of that, is still a kind of hell compared to Glory."⁹⁵ The devil does not get saved, but perhaps by a loving "miracle"⁹⁶ Christ delivers him to Limbo.

Maritain advanced this arresting idea in an essay, "Eschatological Ideas," that he wrote and circulated in mimeographed form 1939, re-circulated again in 1961 in the same form, and published, with corrections and additions, in 1972, the year before his death. The essay offers Maritain's most systematic treatment of Limbo, one of his favorite ideas. Maritain's commitment to Limbo, which he faithfully submits "to the judgment of the Church, a judgment to which I adhere in advance,"⁹⁷ introduces a lacuna into the universality of God's saving will, and any account of Maritain's measure of the child must reckon with it.

Maritain speculates – and his acknowledgment of the *speculative* nature of his inquiry is unequivocal -- that "the souls of little children who died long ago," before Christ, "without the sacraments of the ancient Economy of Salvation," "or now," after Christ, "without the sacrament of baptism"⁹⁸ -- will sleep (and dream, perhaps "the sweetest of dreams")⁹⁹ forever, never called to Glory. At the general resurrection, their bodies will be restored to them, but they will forever inhabit the highest reaches of hell – not punished, but aware that they were not called to the Beatific Vision. Theirs will be the state of pure nature raised to its highest degree. Maritain found himself conspicuously "attached to the notion of Limbo"¹⁰⁰ because, it respects the reality of a pure nature not raised by the grace of the sacraments. What he has to say about their destiny is really quite remarkable:

Oh, little children who have died without baptism, rejected though you have never done evil, you are not an accident in the divine economy, a peculiar case from which the theologians, pressed on all sides, extricate themselves as they can, an insignificant parenthesis. Your role is great,

⁹³ Jacques Maritain, "Eschatological Ideas," ch. 1 in *The Collected Works of Jacques Maritain*, vol. 20 (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 21.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 13 n. 14 (translation corrected based on Jacques Maritain, "Idées Eschatologiques," in *Jacques et Raïssa Maritain Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. XIII [Suisse: Universitaires Fribourg, 1992], 458 n. 13).

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

and your destiny well determined and very significant. You are the first fruits of natural felicity, of nature divinely restored.¹⁰¹

Maritain's text is full of admissions that people may think his views odd or foolish, but the final text, which includes much more speculative detail than concerns us here, was the product of more than a third of a century's reflection.

The single most striking element of the text is what it fails to say as it dispatches unbaptized babies to Limbo for sweet dreams but with no experience of the Beatific Vision. Maritain utterly neglects to consider to reconcile the eternal *rejection*, as Maritain calls it, for which unbaptized children are not responsible, on the one hand, with God's *otherwise* universal salvific will, on the other, according to which, in Maritain's judgment the rest of the time, no is excluded except by personal choice.¹⁰²

Ordinarily, Maritain allows God to be much freer with the grace that is necessary for salvation, not restricting its operations to visible sacraments. Especially in view of the message of hope Anthony Kelly discerns in current theology, the Church's pastoral practice, and the prayer of the Church, the following passage of Maritain's is worth quoting at length. It is taken from the essay in which he offers his most extensive analysis of the "first act of freedom:"

God does not leave man to the weakness of his fallen nature . . . ; grace, before healing and vivifying man anew, is still present to envelop and attract him, to call him and incite him in anticipation. Our fallen nature is exposed to grace as our tired bodies are to the rays of the sun. In the years before his first act of freedom, the child had his own span of history, during the course of which his moral life was being prepared as in a morning twilight – nor was he left to the sole influence of his fallen nature; even if he was not baptized he was spurred by actual grace on various occasions and guises as diverse as the contingencies of human life and the by-ways of divine generosity; in his first motions within that incipient freedom that could be his, he was able to accept or refuse these incitations of grace; thus he has been or more less well prepared to meet the test, a test out of all proportion to the preparation for it and which occurs when, for the first time, he is called upon to decide on the direction of his life. In any case, at that decisive moment when he enters upon his life as a person (and later at the other crucial moments that may occur until

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 17.

¹⁰² "The infant who dies without baptism loves God above all with a love of the natural order;" the love arises from "freedom;" "springs forth under the infallible action of an (unshatterable) operating grace of the natural order as soon as the soul of the infant begins its separated life. The possibility of turning toward God as his freely chosen ultimate end when he reaches the age of reason has been taken away from the infant by a premature death, and the separation of his soul has placed him in *statu termini*" (Jacques Maritain, *The Sin of the Angel*, trans. William L. Rossner [Westminster, Md.: The Newman Press, 1959], 34-35 n. 31). But then explain how baptized infants are called to Glory? They do not choose God as their ultimate end upon reaching the age of reason. But if the Church "supplies" that act, then why not also for those who are not baptized? See Kelly's chapter within this volume.

his last day) grace will still call to him, while being entangled with more or less strength amidst the more or less good tendencies and the more or less great obstacles which derive from nature, heredity and environment. As a result, if he does not decide upon the good, it means that he has slipped away from the help which would have given fallen nature in him the power to choose good for the sake of good and to direct itself toward man's true end, by "healing" that nature and raising it to participation in the divine life.¹⁰³

Conclusion

With the exception of his curious but tenacious hold on Limbo for unbaptized babies, Maritain anticipated the sense of the universalism God's salvific will that is more and more pronounced in Catholic theology today. Through his doctrine of the first act of freedom that is, at least implicitly, a religious act, Maritain invests the child with, at the risk of sounding Pelagian, plenary moral potency. His understanding of the first act of freedom has won him the attention of those contemporary moral philosophers and theologians who identify a "fundamental option" in the person's moral life.¹⁰⁴ Not only would it be anachronistic to align Maritain with this theory, however, it would also be unprofitable and misleading; the diversity of meanings of "fundamental option" in contemporary theory rules out any clear alignment.¹⁰⁵ Still, Maritain does affirm, in conspicuously strong terms, that "[i]n a human life many births, deaths and resurrections may occur" through the "radical decision" that is "the first act of freedom," and it is the child's that is "the most obvious example of such an act of freedom."¹⁰⁶

As Maritain sees it, childhood is on a continuum with the rest of human existence. The human must always be developing by winning his personality and freedom, but he does so by imitating the child, who takes himself in hand and "ushers himself into the moral universe of life." "Vocation" is not a term of art in Maritain's writings, nor is "calling," but both words, and many like them, occur frequently.¹⁰⁷ Prior to professional or religious calling, there is a calling that is common to all, including the child. Working through rational human instincts connaturally known, and elevated through grace, and perhaps through the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the sacrament, God calls everyone, including the (baptized?) child, to win his personality and freedom of independence, that is, to achieve the perfection of love. As love grows, the self recedes

¹⁰³ Maritain, *Range of Reason*, 73.

¹⁰⁴ John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 32.

¹⁰⁵ Maritain discerns moral significance in a person's doing in fact what the moral norm requires; the person who mistakes the moral law is merely excused, not perfected. See <>

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¹⁰⁷ For extended discussion of the "call" all people receive to holiness, see Jacques Maritain, "Preface to Layman's Call, by William R. O'Connor," in *Jacques et Raïssa Maritain Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. VII (Suisse: Universitaires Fribourg, 1988), 1320-29. For vocation as a professional calling, see Maritain, *Education of Man*, 69.

from view. The selfish child must learn his better instincts, and obey them, for they are God's will for his creature.

The education of which Maritain's judges the child needful is laughably or lamentably far from what the current American apparatus is prepared to provide, except to the rich who can choose their own schools. From Maritain's angle, schools that "on principle" would prescind from the nature of the human person in favor of "moral neutrality" would spell almost certain human ruin. What emerges especially clearly from reading Maritain on the child is "how one thing leads to everything else."¹⁰⁸ We might want to talk about only this or that topic, and carve the world up into more manageable or even neutral chunks. But, at least for a Thomist such as Maritain, there is a unity that precedes and will survive difference and distinction, a divine economy in which we are caught up in virtue of our creation, from childhood up. "In casting a good action into the universe, a free agent increases the being of the universe; the universe then increases the being of that free agent so that the balance between them will remain stable."¹⁰⁹ If, by contrast, he nihilates, "he will escape the order of the 'expansion of being' as well as the order of divine intentions and regulations. . . . The deficiency and privation which man has freely produced in himself will produce in the universe a direct fructification of evil."¹¹⁰ The child who can choose for or against the good plays with fire and with God, whether she likes it or not. Tucked within the liberating rough and tumble love of family, the child may have a fighting chance.

¹⁰⁸ Schall, 223.

¹⁰⁹ Maritain, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 80.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*