

“Freedom” in pre-political thought:  
Parallel between Bergson and S. Thomas<sup>\*1</sup>.

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## Foreword

“Maritain’s philosophy is non-political, it goes beyond factions’ alliances even though it inspires them, as for the Christian Democrats South Americans factions, which would choose Maritain as their mentor”<sup>2</sup>. Maritain’s political conception finds its fundament in a precise purpose: it is pluralist, responsible, free and virtuous.

Pluralism arises from the idea that men first interest is the search of a common good. Maritain “recognizes fundamental importance to pluralism as methodology which allows people to reach the common good”<sup>3</sup>. Therein it is possible to understand how “pluralism suggests personalism to leave behind abstract ideas and rhetoric, adding value to everyone as a whole, respecting diversity without let it become disparity”<sup>4</sup>. This kind of politics protects human rights promoting a way of life based on mutual respect through authentic values that share a common good founded on *bonum honestum*. A society that follows this model does not live by a series of individual goods

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In 2017 in Matera, Italy, he established the first Jacques Maritain Chair on *Dialogo e pace tra le culture e le religioni del Mediterraneo*, inaugurated by Sergio Mattarella, President of the Italian Republic.

<sup>1</sup> All the following extracts are translated in English by a partner of International Institute Jacques Maritain, Rome.

<sup>2</sup> P. VIOTTO, *Grandi amicizie. I Maritain e i loro contemporanei*, Città Nuova, Rome 2008, p. 174.

<sup>3</sup> G. GALEAZZI, *Jacques Maritain, un filosofo per il nostro tempo*, Massimo, Milan 1999, p. 34.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

but by the communion of these goods in order to live well.<sup>5</sup> From this pluralist and responsible context comes out a free and virtuous society,

made on purpose by nature and reason, the most perfect among temporal societies. It is a tangible and entirely human reality, tending towards a tangible and entirely human good, the common good. It is the result of reasoning when reason relieved from instinct follows exclusively a rational order; it is not a pure reason as a man is not a pure man<sup>6</sup>.

Considering that a political structure is “made of flesh and blood, it has instincts and passions, reflexes and psychological subconscious’ structures<sup>7</sup>”, virtues become the means to overcome human faults and desires, to fly high in a realm of truth, peace and authentic freedom. A politician needs to understand that the superiority of a virtuous life can overcome the vulgarity of circumstances born from mere senses. He has to find a way to reveal again the beauty of men behavior resulting from intelligence that should guide human beings and their choices first and political preferences after.

## 1. A definition of man

In a political thought, a pre-defined idea of man is essential in order to analyze in great depth the metaphysical idea of ‘politic’ as a value. As a matter of fact Maritain thinks that such idea is the only base on which building a ‘truth of politics’ becomes possible. A man is not an idea but a real person who inhabits the universe in front of God and other men<sup>8</sup>.

Maritain believed that if Bergson, on one hand tries to restore man’s unity denying division between body and soul, on the other he tends to remove spirituality from the soul. Therefore human spirit ends up becoming the memory that “is the same way of our spirit<sup>9</sup>”, a confusion that destroys the human being’s unity<sup>10</sup>. The origin of this confusion has a counterpart within the body’s movement and aptitude. Conscience thus

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. J. MARITAIN, *Les Droits de l’homme et la loi naturelle*, in *Ouvres Complètes*, éditions universitaires Fribourg Suisse-éditions Saint Paul, Paris 1989, vol. VII, pp. 622-625.

<sup>6</sup> ID., *L’homme et l’État*, in OC, 1990, vol. IX, p. 491.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. ID., *De Bergson à Thomas d’Aquin. Essais de métaphysique et de morale*, in OC, 1989, vol. VIII, p. 154.

<sup>9</sup> ID., *La Philosophie Bergsonienne*, in OC, 1989, vol. VIII, p. 344.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. H. BERGSON, *Le due fonti della morale e della religione*, Laterza, Rome-Bari, 1998.

becomes the central idea: from movements it reaches the thought. In Bergson's anthropology we can recognize a sort of monism where the difference between body and soul doesn't rely on its nature but on a different level of intensity of the same thing that becomes action<sup>11</sup>. A man is not made up of a body and a soul, he is only a soul that uses the body carries the actions; only the soul is capable of action and constitutes the human persona as pure intellect.

Maritain overlooks Bergson's ideas to propose a more existentialist interpretation that reflects S. Thomas Aquinas beliefs: a new humanism, "free and conscious of itself capable of leading men towards sacrifice and a superhuman greatness. Human pain brings clarity when is tolerated with love, when doesn't sacrifice the joy, but instead looks for it with a spirit of rejoicing."<sup>12</sup>. The French philosopher senses that the only way to create a new humanism in a society dominated by atheism and materialism, is to engage oneself with what exists. Only relating to the existent around us:

we can bring close what is good and what is bad, we can reach those hidden places of the human heart and the original greatness of men and their downfalls, tuning up with the secret aims of this strange image of God. Pseudo-Dionysius used to say that God is called zealot because of his great love for all that exists. Saint Thomas often repeats this word because he was zealot as well; for this reason he had the virtue to reassure, to alleviate and to reinforce in a peaceful way everything real and human we have inside ourselves<sup>13</sup>.

Maritain always looks for a mediation among intellectuals who give intelligence the main importance, and those who destroy reasoning, looking for an absolute pessimism<sup>14</sup>. Between these two groups S. Thomas stands out as the philosopher of existence<sup>15</sup> who perfectly combined humanism and existence. According to Maritain, S. Thomas was able to truly respect human life and the man himself without separating intelligence and existence as two absolute entities, but using intelligence to grasp existence<sup>16</sup>.

In this sense the created human being acquires meaning in front of both God and other men, it goes from nothingness to a complete rehabilitation in the name of God; an

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. J. MARITAIN, *La Philosophie Bergsonienne*, cit., p. 387.

<sup>12</sup> ID., *Humanisme intégral*, in OC, 1984, vol. VI, p. 300.

<sup>13</sup> ID., *De Bergson à...*, cit., p. 154.

<sup>14</sup> Cf., *ivi*, p. 155.

<sup>15</sup> Cf., *ivi*, p. 154.

<sup>16</sup> Cf., *ivi*, p. 155.

integral humanism of Incarnation that reclaims a highly wise concept of freedom where men can autonomously and truly make choices.

## **2. Freedom of spontaneity and freedom of independence between Bergson and S. Thomas**

Maritain perceives that freedom coming from an integral humanism is the only one capable of building a politic of truth, in which the person becomes the center, the one who makes choices without forgetting that his actions have an existential purpose. Maritain sustains that Bergson talks about freedom but he does not define what is a “free action” because of the confusion between body and soul. In politics there is not an acting soul, but a real man living in the world, finding the rightest and truest solutions and having *bonum honestum* as purpose.

In the anthropological Bergson’s idea of monism the soul prevails over the body, and what becomes essential are the notions of time and change. In this vision we catch a glimpse of the meaning of freedom, divided into freedom of spontaneity and freedom of independence<sup>17</sup>. The first one has to go through four steps before turning into freedom of independence. The first step is part of nature in general, it’s spontaneity that surfaces even in not-living corporeal substances. On this level, corporeal substance is only controlled by external actions. It’s a transitive activity<sup>18</sup>. The second step is given by living corporeal organisms at a vegetative state, where it is already recognizable an immanent activity<sup>19</sup>. On the third step one finds the knowledge of instinct – states Maritain – called estimative by S. Thomas. Everything that seems beyond physical is canceled by the physical. The fourth step is part of a higher order since intellectual life resides here. Everything is spiritual and goes beyond any form of possible nature<sup>20</sup>.

With the freedom of independence a man naturally aims to the desire for transcendence and spontaneity becomes the main manifestation of independence.

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<sup>17</sup> Cf., *ivi*, pp. 95-96.

<sup>18</sup> Cf., *ivi*, pp. 96-97.

<sup>19</sup> Cf., *ivi*, p. 97.

<sup>20</sup> Cf., *ivi*, p. 100.

Maritain notices that also S. Thomas<sup>21</sup> was mentioning freedom of choice and freedom of spontaneity.

Transcendence becomes second nature of the freedom of choice where love is necessary to men searching a common good. In St. Thomas idea of freedom there is not only desire coming from the senses but also free will that wants to achieve always and necessarily an absolute good and a full happiness<sup>22</sup>.

If happiness is what inevitably defines free will – and happiness is a boundless and total good that satisfy all my desires – therefore what is not boundless good cannot necessarily define my will<sup>23</sup>.

Every particular, human or celestial good is chosen by a free action of will<sup>24</sup>. Each choice taken reveals both the desire for something as free will and the intelligence to comprehend that will. Intelligence brings us to an uncertainty principle caused by the absence of what is desired. This is “freedom itself<sup>25</sup>”, indeed “freedom is in the will’s control over the practical judgment that determines it<sup>26</sup>”. Will has a precise task: bringing this indeterminacy of intelligence from a speculative-practical view to a practical-practical one. Through this transition carried out the by will, intelligence can reach the hoped for happiness. Naturally the individual is at the center of this process not only as a combination of body and soul, but also embodied in the world, projected towards the ultimate good. According to Maritain – in St. Thomas thought – being truly free means “to be the master of one’s own judgment<sup>27</sup>” and to have total control over actions.

Freedom of spontaneity is more independent and substantial and free from obligations. This level of freedom makes man aware of his fragility and of his need of a body and instincts as proofs of his finite nature. An individual perceives a basic need: a drastic ontological unity from where freedom can grow strongly.

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. TH. AQUINATIS, *Summa Theologiae*, in *Opera Omnia*, cura et studio Fratrum eiusdem ordinis, ex Typographia Poliglotta, Romae, 1891, vol. VI, I-II, q. 89.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. J. MARITAIN, *De Bergson à...*, cit., p. 75.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. TH. AQUINATIS, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. VI, I-II, q. 13, a. 1.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. J. MARITAIN, *De Bergson à...*, cit., p. 78.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>27</sup> *Ivi*, p. 80.

Maritain's analysis of Bergson and S. Thomas concepts of freedom does not reveal a big difference between the two. What inspires the French philosopher is the interweaving between the two kinds of freedoms described by St. Thomas because are fundamental to bring out the "free act". It is a crucial moment when men make choices, all kind of them, even the political ones. The dynamism of a free act comes from the link between those two kinds of freedom, the freedom of choice is necessary to the freedom of spontaneity. You cannot live in a perfect freedom outside of this connection. "A free man is the one that decides for himself, he is his own master and controls his life; a servant instead is related to another man and in this state of slavery he only can contribute to the individual good of his lord"<sup>28</sup>.

### 3. Freedom: instinct and virtue in politics<sup>29</sup>

Only this freedom based on a superior level is able to relate politics and common good from which it is possible to build a society on honesty and authentic values. It is a freedom of a spiritual order, but it's present in everyday life with the purpose of elevating human weaknesses and encouraging men corrupted by their own fragility, making them fly high beyond personal interest. Freedom becomes power inside of us since it transcends material aspects, beyond hedonism and every physical aspect of life. Only this kind of metaphysical freedom can drive us towards dialogue because it gets rid of prejudice. Embracing a dialogue means to remove prejudices and every single judgment, and to be free from this form of slavery in order to appreciate the beauty of this given treasure. Dialogue clearly becomes the foundation around which to build the good as *bonum honestum*, that kind of good that is more than simply physical and reaches through a practical-practical act the common good. Where *bonum honestum* is to be found? Maritain replies even among intellectually divided men is possible to cooperate for a practical common objective<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> *Ivi*, p. 87.

<sup>29</sup> For a wider knowledge on freedom's relationship with impulse and virtue under an ethical aspect please refer to *Il volto dell'amore e dell'amicizia tra passione e virtù. Una riflessione etica su Jacques Maritain*, Rubbettino, Saveria Mannelli, 2009.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. J. MARITAIN, Address at the Opening of the UNESCO conference", Mexico City 1947, in Proceeding of the Second Session of UNESCO, I, April 1947, pp. 27-43, "*Discorso di apertura all'Assemblea dell'UNESCO a Città del Messico*", in "Studium", XLIV, 1948, pp. 325-333.

It is possible to find this practical purpose in the rudiments of common good, since they come from inner freedom which allows dialogue, looks for a non egotistical good but for the good in itself: person, politics, science, technology or other domains. The concept of good resulting from this reasoning means to make it a goal, not just a temporary moment (I would like this today because it is going to give me something back). Good is going to be the same forever. Following this path the purpose of politics is to find an ontological good for the people and society, in which a party becomes a medium to lead us to that goal. A society like this based on authentic freedom is able to transcend the temporal values and to encourage a true dialogue, always searching for *bonum honestum*.

In this sense diversity – in its *status* – will have valid values for everyone according to both practice and theory<sup>31</sup>. As Viotto says “Practice and theory influence each other, but a philosophic consideration – that can lead to a political project – cannot put itself at the service of a political faction<sup>32</sup>. A true faction becomes analysis and resolution of common human life’s fundamental problems.

A philosopher places himself outside of factions. His independence in front of the immediate action to do – which needs quite a bit of art and technique- is the exact opposite of escaping reality. The philosopher is useful to other human beings only as a human being himself who chooses the freedom of intelligence over the temporary instants. To be free doesn’t mean to be emotionless but it means working towards the goal of establishing the correct principles of politics<sup>33</sup>.

It follows that according to Maritain trusting a faction is not a way to be in the world, it is necessary that reason guide us in our actions, because only reason is able to recognize the ultimate goal, through *bonum honestum*, the only good that has a value in itself. Only intelligence enables us into making authentic, true and free choices, in the most total independence. It is therefore evident how “it’s necessary to overcome the left and the right’s schematism<sup>34</sup>”, to make flourish “the values of truth, justice and fraternal

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. P. NEPI, “La questione laicità”, in *La laicità ne Le Paysan de la Garonne di Jacques Maritain*, by G. G. Curcio, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli, 2008, pp. 22-23.

<sup>32</sup> P. VIOTTO, *Grandi amicizie. I Maritain e i loro contemporanei*, Città Nuova, Rome, 2008, p. 174.

<sup>33</sup> *Ivi*, p. 175.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*.



friendship<sup>35</sup>”. These values belong to everyone, no matter if he’s politician, Christian, Muslim or Jewish: true values belong to the whole community. Maritain asserts that this is the truth pursued by a philosopher, because “if philosophy is one of the forces that contributes to the making of history with all its transformations in the world, it’s because philosophy, whose main task is the metaphysical comprehension of the being, only aims to contemplate the truth<sup>36</sup>”. Authentic and valuable politics are possible only if supported by that kind of freedom based on truth and virtues. Politics may be corrupted, may be vicious, may suggest the desire to prevaricate on others or to gain illicit rewards. There is a delicate balance between instinct – or man’s desire – and intellect. Learned moral virtues can help our action and lead us to a wise freedom. Justice, prudence, fortitude and restraint can resist to the assaults of humans nature or of those in power<sup>37</sup>. Man after his downfall became weak and only virtues can save him. His actions become a choice in which he “is free and responsible<sup>38</sup>”, since he has “the power of well doing, as soon as he becomes aware of the idea of good and the life of reason<sup>39</sup>”. Starting from this intention of living and acting as a consequence of choosing a universal good, it’s possible to build true politics. Men are not only free because they can choose but above all because through their choices they can reach the truth in politics, a common good and they can assert their true nature. Real freedom then does not come from choice but it originates from a general truth shared by every responsible individual. Clearly, a free action doesn’t come only from a will’s decision but also from an intellect’s obligation<sup>40</sup>. Where will and intellect meet we also find the desire of acting good against bad habits and the rationality of our actions. The political action needs a preeminence of intellect and a preference for cognitive processes over operative and emotional processes. Those politicians who are not able to go beyond the “left-right” duality are trapped within a politic that is not free, that is slave of itself and where political alliances “are nothing less than exasperated emotional complexes<sup>41</sup>”.

To understand the sense of a political system and its central importance, we need to refer to the basic relation of body and soul that each human being carries within himself.

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>36</sup> J. Maritain, *La philosophe dans la cité*, in OC, 1991, vol. XI, p. 17.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. ID., *Science et Sagesse*, in OC, 193, vol. VI, pp. 180-210.

<sup>38</sup> ID., *Raison et raisons*, in OC, 1990, vol. IX, p. 332.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>40</sup> Cf., ID., *Neuf leçons sur les notions premières de la philosophie morale*, in OC, 1990, vol. IX, pp. 873-887.

<sup>41</sup> ID., *Lettre sur l’Indépendance*, in OC, 1993, vol. VI, p. 276.



Even if earthly things seem more important, they cannot prevail on spiritual matters since inside spirituality is the key to make a man's path authentic.

Politics, entangled in the temporal events, can elevate only if it understands that the only power able to solve everyday problems comes from intellect.

Hoping for "good" politics means choosing a human environment where the instinct of supremacy and power is overcome by a "good life" that, associated to a "virtuous life", commands our existence thanks to *bonum honestum*<sup>42</sup>.

## Conclusion

Maritain's political approach is truly anthropological, metaphysical and ethical. Political freedom is only possible through a human education since men are called to a supernatural life, and the goals of earthly life are far less important than the ones associated to eternal life. For this reason it is necessary to base everything on a superior level rather than human deficiencies. In "*Primauté du spirituel*" Maritain pursues the creation of a Realm beyond earthly life, which is not outside of it, but at the same time he also dislikes politics that depends from Church but

if I am persuaded to speak about politics and religion, it is not to treat Church as dominant neither to abandon philosophic ground [...]: the present study represents a work of a philosopher observing contemporary occurrences from his point of view<sup>43</sup>.

The individual becomes author and center of politics because good politics can only be the result of a good human and spiritual education<sup>44</sup>. Politics is built for and by this type of virtuous man in which responsible freedom is the source of actions and choices; there is instinct – that belongs to the sensory capabilities of a man – that joins the intellect – which instead belongs to the spiritual values of a human being. In conclusion the choice of living politics for a common good is not reduced to a spontaneous approach but it's rational. A man who looks for spirituality chooses love for guiding his

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. J. MARITAIN, *Science et Sagesse*, in OC, 193, vol. VI, pp. 180-210.

<sup>43</sup> J. MARITAIN, *Primauté du spirituel*, in OC, 1984, vol. III, p. 785.

<sup>44</sup> With the term "spiritual" is intended the dedication of who wants to research itself and something which is beyond humanity, not simply being part of a religion.



actions and doing so reaches a big accomplishment: he makes of his life a better path, where justice, freedom and authenticity come together in the search of the truth.