

**Denis A. Scrandis**

St. John's University (Ret)  
Jamaica, NY  
USA

## THE END OF MAN IN JACQUES MARITAIN'S CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY

### Christian Revelation Redefines the End of Man

Man is curious and has reflected on the meaning of life since ancient times. Some of the historic wisdoms express the ideals and aspirations of people of different ages and cultures.<sup>1</sup>

Jacques Maritain considered the question of the end of man in his work *Moral Philosophy, a Historical and Critical Survey of the Great Systems*.<sup>2</sup> He examined there the treatment of human finality in several classic wisdoms as well as how Christianity redefined the subject. India, for instance, offered a wisdom of deliverance to a few, which is to be achieved through the ascetic and mystical efforts of human beings. Greek wisdom did not turn toward salvation or eternal deliverance but

---

<sup>1</sup> See Thaddeus Metz, "The Meaning of Life," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Summer 2013 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/life-meaning/>, accessed on Nov 20, 2017. Also, see Germain Grisez, "Man, Natural End of," in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 9, ed. William Wallace, O.P. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 132–138; Fulvio Di Blasi, "Ultimate End, Human Freedom, and Beatitude: A Critique of Germain Grisez," *The American Journal of Jurisprudence* 46:1 (January 2001): 113–135.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Moral Philosophy, a Historical and Critical Survey of the Great Systems* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964).

started with sensible reality and sought knowledge of nature and the cosmos. Hebraic wisdom, which is a teaching of salvation and saintliness, does not coach man to rise by his own efforts but proclaims a wisdom of saintliness that is given by God and not won by man.<sup>3</sup>

Christianity introduced the mystery of the incarnation to the world, which Maritain characterized as the “descent of the divine plenitude into human nature.” This plenitude or abundance is not just a new teaching added to the competing wisdoms but something more that radically recast one’s entire understanding of the nature and meaning of life. The Christian gospel reveals in one short sentence the ultimate end of human life. *Luke* 23:43 quotes Jesus on the cross saying to the chastened, repentant, and believing “good thief,” “Today thou shalt be with me in Paradise.” Here Christian revelation discloses that the final end of man is God Himself. This end consists of objective and subjective aspects. Firstly, God is the objective end. Secondly, beatitude or the experience of being with God in Paradise, which envelopes one in the supreme and saturating joy of God, is the subjective end.<sup>4</sup>

As with Indian, Greek, and Hebraic wisdoms, Christianity introduced a distinctive way of life that leads to its distinctive end. For Maritain, the “divine plenitude” brought to man new values and virtues, a new relation to God, as well as a new end. Maritain begins his treatment with an analysis and criticism of Aristotle’s position on the end of man that sets the stage for his own position, which learns from both Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas.

### **The Aristotelian Supreme and Sovereign End of Man**

Aristotle developed his idea of the end of man, not in the sense of a physical nature realizing its developmental potential as when an acorn becomes a tree but, in the sense of an adult human being freely devel-

---

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 71–73.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 75–76.

oping his character through his own disciplined rational choices. In his theory of human action, the Aristotelian agent (a moving cause) imposes a plan of action (a formal cause) upon his mental and bodily activities (material causes) to achieve his end or purpose (the final cause). In the typical voluntary action, an agent chooses a contemplated means to achieve a desired or intended end. Aristotle also encouraged moral agents to discover and use a standard to guide the choice of means-to-end that is akin to the archer's "aim point," which facilitates hitting the archer's target. What is this aim-point that facilitates hitting life's target? What are we aiming for in life?

Aristotle stated in his *Nicomachean Ethics* that the ultimate end in life, the supreme good of man, is happiness.<sup>5</sup> Such happiness is broadly speaking a life of wisdom and moral virtue lived in a manner that achieves the perfect fulfillment of human nature.<sup>6</sup> How does it do that? Happiness is constructed to accommodate the structure and aspirations of human nature achieving such goods as family, friends, health, culture, and social accomplishments. It is neither other worldly nor eternal but becomes imminent in this perishable body in this earthly life.<sup>7</sup>

The agent uses happiness as the sovereign or ruling good by which he judges whether a proposed action is conducive or not to achieving happiness. Now, if happiness is both the end and the measure of a means to the end, does this dual role pose a problem?

---

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Robert C. Bartlett, "Aristotle's Introduction to the Problem of Happiness: On Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*," *American Journal of Political Science* 52 (2008): 677–687.

<sup>6</sup> Maritain, *Moral Philosophy*, 31.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

### Maritain's Critique of Aristotle's Supreme End: Happiness

The end of Aristotelian man is happiness, which is composed of many elements especially of wisdom, moral virtue, and pleasure.<sup>8</sup> However, happiness is used as a ruling or sovereign good as well as a supreme good. Yet, Maritain reasons, if a norm were used as a sovereign good to measure the possibility that a course of action tends toward or away from happiness, both the measure and the measured would contain virtue and wisdom in order to make an affirmative ruling. This testing method uses happiness (virtue and wisdom) as both sovereign and supreme goods (saying to the means "be good to become good") and constructs a vicious circle (because you are already good).<sup>9</sup>

Another problem of this supreme good is that it involves so many possibilities that one can rightly ask whether they are all attainable in any one life and whether the end is definable. If for example I were to become a physician and a surgeon, I would achieve a great deal in life. Again if I were to become a lawyer and a judge, I also would achieve a great deal. Yet it would be unlikely that I could become both the surgeon and the judge, even though both career tracks are components of happiness. Since many (or most) components of happiness are not practically attainable, this supreme good is too rich in content. This happiness eludes us vanishing from our reach even as we attain some of its components.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, since Aristotle identified the supreme good with happiness, Maritain understood that Aristotle identified happiness with the joy that accompanies the acquisition of a good, that is to say, with the subjective aspect of attaining the supreme good.<sup>11</sup> This personal happiness, when it is desired and loved as the supreme end, is desired and

---

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

loved for the sake of the person whom it perfects.<sup>12</sup> In loving my happiness as my supreme good, my love entraps me in a love of self from which I cannot be delivered.<sup>13</sup> Aristotle's notion of happiness turns his ethics into egoism.

Maritain criticizes Aristotle for failing to identify some final good thing beyond purely human happiness.

Aristotle was right to seek in . . . the happiness towards which we tend not by choice but by necessity of nature the point of departure of ethics. But when it comes to the point of arrival, and the determination of what the true happiness of man consists in, the happiness towards which we must tend by free choice, then he sees neither that this true happiness is in fact something beyond purely human happiness, nor that it is itself ordered to a Good which is better and loved more than any happiness.<sup>14</sup>

Maritain intends a metaphysical criticism here. The Aristotelian supreme good (or happiness) consists of enjoying a set of human goods that does not include any supra-human goods. With the philosophical tools he had at hand, Aristotle could have reasoned to a good that is better and more lovable than human happiness, and Maritain laments this failure.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Christian Absolute Ultimate End Reorders Priorities**

The proposition that God is the end of man is divine revelation and absolutely true for Maritain. However, it is a fact or datum of faith rather than reason.<sup>16</sup> Elements of faith belong to the province of theolo-

---

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 50–51.

<sup>15</sup> Reasoning, since there are immaterial supra-human goods that are superior to man and the run of human goods, man's rational appetite once having glimpsed such higher goods would then desire to possess them. Cf. Ron Ramsing, "A Critique of Aristotelian Ethics of Happiness and Enlightenment Ethics," *Illuminare* 7:1 (2001): 11–18.

<sup>16</sup> Maritain, *Moral Philosophy*, 76.

gy, whereas elements of reason belong to philosophy. The evidential bases of these disciplines differ greatly and Maritain here consciously brings a theological premise into his philosophy.

The direct union of beatitude is beyond human capacity because of the infinite transcendence of God over man. Beatitude, not a part of the natural order, is a part of the supernatural order and a gift of divine grace when it appears in the natural order.<sup>17</sup>

Maritain, in light of the priority held by God, says that the first demand and condition of moral rectitude is to love the good more than happiness and that Aristotle failed to see this distinction between the good and happiness when he (perhaps under the influence of egoism) identified the good as happiness.<sup>18</sup> Aristotelian happiness locked one into a love of self.

Beatitude is loved but God is to be loved more. Beatitude can only be really and truly loved if it is loved in and for the love of God. My happiness, which I naturally and necessarily desire, has been dethroned or subordinated to something better and more lovable.<sup>19</sup> Christian morality is a morality of the divine good supremely loved and thus a morality of beatitude.<sup>20</sup>

### **Grace and Supernatural Realities Reconfigure Relations between God and Man**

Maritain characterized the mystery of the incarnation as the descent of the divine plenitude into human nature. It is not limited simply to the conception of Jesus in His mother's womb. For Maritain, grace and an entire order of "supernatural realities," even a "new order of being," impacts human freedom, actions, and finality. This new order is

---

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

not physically evident but is manifest to intelligence as essentially distinct from the order of nature and as perfecting the order of nature.

How does Maritain describe the properties of this new order? These "supernatural realities," which are beyond created nature, signify a perfecting participation in a gratuitous divine communication. Nature here is not closed in upon itself but is perfected by grace, which heightens nature in its own activities and elevates nature to the life and activity of an order beyond its own human capacity.<sup>21</sup> (Did not the good Samaritan act with a compassion beyond nature and custom?)

What are these "supernatural realities?" There are dispositions in man that are too weak or humble to constitute virtues or strengths in the purely human order. Yet, in the divine order and as gifts of grace directed to the divine Good as their object, faith, hope, and charity unite the human soul to the divine Good. Faith is the adherence of the intellect to an object (God) that is not seen. Hope is confidence in one (God) more powerful than oneself. And, charity is love of God and neighbor. Unlike the nature-based moral virtues of courage and temperance, no one of these divine virtues consists in a mean between extremes of excess and defect: one never believes too much in God nor puts too much hope in God nor loves God too much. Man can now live by virtues rooted in God and follow a path that leads beyond philosophic happiness to God. Ultimately, the perfection of human life depends upon charity, the highest divine virtue.<sup>22</sup>

### **Grace Develops a Friendship between God and Man**

Maritain believed that faith, hope, and charity can root the Christian's life in the divine life and that the Aristotelian virtue "friendship" applies to the dynamic God-man relationship.

---

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 79–80.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

The notion of friendship requires a degree of equality between its participants. Yet, although Jesus calls some of his followers his friends, one wonders how a love of friendship can possibly exist between the transcendent God and man? Now, God communicates various gifts such as faith, hope, and charity, which raise man to the supernatural order and give him a share in the very life and goods of God. This sharing of goods produces the community of life that constitutes a relationship of friendship properly so-called.<sup>23</sup>

Received divine charity-love, if fruitful, flows from God to us and then from us to God and all other men whom God also calls to be his friends. In this way, love of God and love of the brethren are one charity-love upon which Christianity makes the whole moral life depend. The twin precepts to love God and brethren form a single precept that characterizes the divine life of grace that can begin here and now and extend all the way to beatitude.<sup>24</sup>

There is a major reversal in the making of the saint or moral hero. The Christian saint is not a Superman formed by his own agency. The Christian saint, whose life is no less rational for its dependence on grace, draws his life from supernatural charity by throwing his weakness open to the divine plenitude. The perfection of human life is no longer conceived in terms of humanly attainable wisdom and virtue but is the grace-given perfection of charity from which no one is excluded except by his own refusal.<sup>25</sup> Christianity reveals to us that the ultimate fulfillment to which our poor life proceeds is to possess God thanks to grace while neither exalting our natural potentialities nor underestimating the dignity of our nature.<sup>26</sup> Aristotle praised the friendships that obtain among men and women of high moral character. Yet happiness enriched by friendship remains merely human. On the other hand,

---

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 81–82.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 83–85.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 84–85.



God's human friends begin relationships with God that aspire to full communion in heaven.

### **Maritain's Notion of Man's Final End**

What did Maritain learn from Aristotle regarding man's final end? The Aristotelian supreme end appears to have been in itself a being of reason (a set of means or actions) that lacks a unified essence and a real existence. The supreme end came to be pursued in terms of its subjective side in a way that yields egoism which in turn disrespects the rights of others and is incompatible with the virtue of justice (also an element of happiness). The objective side of the supreme end was not developed. With happiness defined in terms of personal fulfillment, the possible ways of a fulfillment are too variable and numerous to constitute a definite and stable goal. Also, this notion of happiness, since it functions as both sovereign and supreme end, tends toward a vicious circle. Maritain learned that an infra-human supreme end is fraught with difficulties.

Christianity's distinction of a superior objective end (God) and a lesser subjective end (being with God) facilitated overcoming the problem of egoism. The recognition that the absolute ultimate end is infinitely better and more lovable than the subjective ultimate end elevates love of the absolute ultimate end over love of the subjective ultimate end and subordinates love of personal happiness and self to love of God. If one were to reverse the priorities and love the subjective ultimate end in and for itself, rather than love the absolute ultimate end in and for itself, one would de-link oneself from the absolute ultimate end and fail entirely to reach the ultimate end. The subjective ultimate end or beatitude is loved truly only if it is loved in and for love of the absolute ultimate end or God. Maritain's distinctions remove ambiguity and recognize charity's hierarchic ordering of man's love for God.

Did Maritain justify the use of theological terms in his moral philosophy? Maritain explained that where faith, hope, charity, and the like

are integrated into the substance of the moralist's reflection, either one could ignore these factors of moral experience and elaborate an impoverished theory of action or one could embrace them in discussion and elaborate a fully dimensional moral philosophy that would depend in diverse ways on both faith and reason.<sup>27</sup> Now, Maritain knew that Aristotle's use of reason unaided by faith in regard to defining happiness had failed. And, since he wished to render fair consideration to his grace-enriched moral experience, Maritain defined the end of man in his moral philosophy using the appropriate terms and characterized his moral philosophy as "moral philosophy adequately considered."

Why did Maritain invoke the incarnation in his discussion of man's end? The incarnation brought God into humanity. Christ's sacrifice on the cross made satisfaction for the sin of Adam and redeemed men from sin. Has divine intervention changed man, his moral activity, and his finality? The divine intervention elevated human life and redefined human finality. Man could now live by virtues rooted in God, and the end of resurrected men and women is now being with God in Paradise.

---

## THE END OF MAN IN JACQUES MARITAIN'S CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY

### SUMMARY

This essay considers man's perennial search for the meaning of life, specifically in its philosophical (Aristotelian) formulation namely as the pursuit of happiness, and how Christianity radically redefined the issue. Jacques Maritain began his philosophical analysis on the basis of Aristotle's analysis because he regards Aristotle's position as the finest fruit of reason even though it fails. Maritain's analysis supplements Aristotle's with man's experience of the Incarnation and the Christian's experience of faith, hope, and charity. Jesus promised the good thief "Today thou shalt be with me in paradise" (*Luke 23:43*) and thereby identified God as man's objective end. Jacques Maritain's reflection employs rational concepts drawn from reason and theological concepts

---

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 85–86.

---

taken from theology, adequately considered the issue, and constitutes a Christian philosophical treatment of the end of man.

#### KEYWORDS

Absolute ultimate end, anthropology, beatitude, Christian philosophy, happiness, eudaimonia, Incarnation, supreme end, sovereign end, theological virtues, faith, hope, charity.

#### REFERENCES

- Bartlett, Robert C. "Aristotle's Introduction to the Problem of Happiness: On Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*." *American Journal of Political Science* 52 (2008): 677–687.
- Di Blasi, Fulvio. "Ultimate End, Human Freedom, and Beatitude: A Critique of Germain Grisez." *The American Journal of Jurisprudence* 46:1 (January 2001): 113–135.
- Grisez, Germain. "Man, Natural End of." In *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 9. Ed. William Wallace, O.P. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967, 132–138.
- Maritain, Jacques. *Moral Philosophy, a Historical and Critical Survey of the Great Systems*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964.
- Ramsing, Ron. "A Critique of Aristotelian Ethics of Happiness and Enlightenment Ethics." *Illuminare* 7:1 (2001): 11–18.

#### The Internet Sources

- Metz, Thaddeus. "The Meaning of Life." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Ed. Edward N. Zalta. Summer 2013 Edition: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/life-meaning/>, accessed on Nov 20, 2017.