

MARITAIN'S CRITICISM OF DESCARTES' THEORY OF ERROR

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Maritain's remarks on the Cartesian system contain two objections to the theory of error developed in Meditation 4.¹ This theory relies on a conception of the truth of ideas as the immediate identity of affirmation and idea in the intuitive grasp of the structure of an idea and the doctrine of the indifference of the will to true ideas, which explains the tendency of the will to sustain its assent to unfounded ideas and those ultimately incoherent. Maritain objected that if truth is the immediate identity of affirmation and idea then ideas are unrelated to any reality external to the mind in which the affirmation occurs and that, in this doctrine, the will is too closely united to the intellect to be indifferent to it. However, a response implicit in Descartes, more explicitly developed in Spinoza, is that the quality of indifference is essential to reality as a whole and to the nature of free agents.

The groundwork for this response is found in Meditations 1 and 2, where Descartes suggested that because the judgement, “I think” (the *cogito*),² determines its own reality and truth, this idea defines truth. This is the idea in which the reality of the affirmation of ideas is affirmed. This is the reality of the

¹ John Cottingham, trans., *René Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy: with selections from the Objections and Replies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. Citations in parentheses are to the standard Adam and Tannery, ed., *Oeuvres de Descartes*, 12 Vols., Paris: J. Vrin, revised ed. 1964–1976, abbreviated AT. Except if otherwise noted, the reference is to volume VII. This is also the pagination in the margin of the Cottingham translation.

² The passage in the Second Meditation reads *dubito ergo sum*, or “I doubt, therefore, I am,” which does not directly say *cogito ergo sum*, or “I think, therefore, I am”; however, doubting is a mode of thinking, and the parallel passage in the *Discourse on Method* does read “je pence, donc, je suis” (AT VI, 32). This reading is confirmed in the much later, *Principles of Philosophy* (AT VIII-1, 6–7), where the inference is based directly on thinking.

immediate intuition of ideas insofar as they are affirmed but also a quality of being opposed to the structure of ideas in which elements are related. It is “clear” in that the structure of the idea is wholly and immediately intuited. It is also “distinct,” i.e., it is meaningful; it defines the thinking subject through the unique quality of affirmation as opposed to the structure of ideas.

One finds the contrary idea cannot be true, an idea in which the reality of affirmation is denied. This denial is not in itself the problem, as it is possible to psychologically withdraw assent. The issue is with the idea of this idea, or the affirmation of the structure of this denial. This is the structure of the idea in which the opposing quality of denial is ascribed to the reality specified. To affirm the idea of this idea involves denying its own reality and truth. The idea is unclear, as it is impossible to wholly affirm the idea.

Similarly, a sensory or mathematical idea is problematic in as much as one tries to affirm the idea of this idea, as it becomes evident that there is no mathematical idea to explain the relation of the relations considered in mathematics to their term and there is no sensory idea in which the relation of these ideas to their objects is explained. Insofar as the *cogito* displays the structure of an idea, it is problematic in the same way, as no immediate intuition reveals the relation of this intuition to the structure of ideas in which the intuition and idea are related. The problem is not that the idea of the idea is unclear; rather, it is that these idea are unrelated to any reality apart from themselves. Such ideas, although they are not false, are therefore indistinct. However, as there must be such a relation to account for the truth of the *cogito*, one’s clear and distinct idea of God, being the idea of the substance on which every other depends, necessarily exists, as demonstrated in Meditation 3. This demonstrates the relative reality and truth of sensory ideas, ideas in mathematics, and ideas in metaphysics. Although the nature of their relation to God is impossible for the finite intellect to wholly comprehend, thus its ideas are never wholly distinct, the criterion of clarity suffices to test the truth of these ideas. As Descartes wrote, God that did not supply him with “the kind of faculty which would ever enable me to go wrong while using it correctly” (54).

A failure to affirm clear and distinct ideas was conceived by Descartes as a failure of finite intellects to participate in the reality of ideas in God’s intellect. The more one understands the reality of God’s intellect the more one’s own experience is real. But in the nature of the case, the finite intellect is “as it were, something intermediate between God and nothingness” (54). As it is finite, the finite intellect is incapable of having a complete comprehension of the reality contained in the infinite intellect. The distinct idea in its nature requires another to explain its relation to the real. In God, the whole series of these ideas of idea is affirmed. The finite intellect is only capable of bridging its separation from God by degrees and through attention to the clarity and relative distinctness of ideas.

This conception of truth thus resembles the conception of “evil” St. Augustine developed to absolve God from guilt in the creation of a world in which there is the experience of moral and physical evil. This experience is not the experience of a reality such as would be known through a “negation” of the one real thing in opposition to the another in the idea in which these elements in experience are related; rather, it is known through a “privation” of the systematic order constitutive of both reality and the good. Evil is conflict. It has no reality as systematic order, and this absolves God from any guilt in creating it. In Descartes, thus, “error is not a pure negation, but rather a privation or lack of some knowledge which somehow should be in me” (55).

Gilson’s idea of the infinite in nature is thus present in Descartes’ system as the idea of the systematic interrelation of things in which the common good is realized, i.e., in which every element is determined through its relation to every other and to God.³ The idea of the systematic structure of the world is the idea of the complete reality on which every entity depends demonstrated in Meditation 3. In Meditation 4, Descartes repeated this demonstration in a truncated form: “after considering the immense power of God, I cannot deny that many other things have been made by him, or at least could have been made, and hence that I may have a place in the universal scheme of things” (56).

This is the “final cause” of the world in as much as it is an abstract idea, distinct from the reality of its object. This is the form in which the perfection of the creatures of the world is realized. It is something creatures consciously strive to realize, although they are able to have only a probable knowledge that this is the form in which they are perfected. The difference is that, for Gilson, one’s knowledge that this is their perfection is only probable knowledge, as one’s knowledge of this depends on understanding the relation of this idea to the reality of God; but, for Descartes, it is known on grounds that this is the only conceivable structure of the whole. Speculation about the probable structure of things is groundless unless it is grounded in the clarity of ideas. God “is capable of countless things,” wrote Descartes, “whose causes are beyond my knowledge,” and “for this reason,” as earlier stated, Descartes considered the “customary search for final causes to be totally useless in physics” (55).

Understanding the infinite through a clear and distinct idea enables one to act independently of the given circumstances and to pursue courses of action perceived to be good through the idea of the common good. To this extent, the will has the freedom spontaneity, or self-determination, according to Descartes (56). Without the guidance of the idea in the intellect, the will is merely indeterminate, although this is, in Descartes’ outlook, the one feature of the finite mind by which it most resembles God. This is the finite mind’s “ability to do or

³ E. Gilson, *La liberté chez Descartes et la théologie*, Paris: Félix Alcan, 1913, pp. 105, 117, 122.

not do something (that is, to affirm or deny, to pursue or avoid)" (57). As indifferent, this will is unrestricted. But because it is inadequately informed, it has the lowest form of freedom, the freedom of indifference, and the superior, spontaneous freedom involves the recognition of the ascending series of the more comprehensive systematic ideas, culminating in the idea of the common good. This comprehension is essential to spontaneity, whether it is given through revelation as the object of faith and hope and the form of charity or it is given through the activity of the intellect in the clear and distinct idea: "neither divine grace nor natural knowledge ever diminishes freedom; on the contrary they increase and strengthen it," wrote Descartes, and "the indifference I feel when there is no reason pushing me in one direction rather than another is the lowest grade of freedom; it is evidence not of any perfection of freedom, but rather of a defect in knowledge or a kind of negation" (58).

With attention to clear and distinct ideas, one can build the systematic character of one's understanding and thereby acquire a greater spontaneity. Accordingly, as Descartes increased his understanding of God's nature and his relation to God, "the spontaneity and freedom of my belief was all the greater in proportion to my lack of indifference" (59). One's errors in judgement thus result from a refusal to develop the systematic character of the understanding, and this results from the free choice of the will in as much as it is indifferent. But through the affirmation of clear and distinct ideas in the intellect, the will becomes spontaneous.

As Gilson observed, Descartes' view of the cause of error in the will is like Aquinas's doctrine of sin (*Ia* 63, 1 ad 4 and *Ia* 17, 1).⁴ Aquinas remarked that the will tends naturally toward the good; the intellect is the will's guide in effectively achieving its objective. One cannot be said to choose this objective, only ways of achieving it; however, one's choice of the means alters the end in some respects (*IaIIae* 13, 1 ad 2, *IaIIae* 14, 1 ad 1). This doctrine depends, however, on a certain priority of the intellect. If the doctrine is transposed to cover the will in the sense of both the will in action and the will in the affirmation of ideas, either the will is determined in as much as ideas are, which is the weakness of Descartes' system pressed in Maritain's criticism, or the doctrine is open to Gassendi's objection, which is that in acting independently of the intellect, the will is unable to choose (315),⁵ and this is the weakness pressed in the work of Gilson.

In response to Gassendi, Descartes suggested that the erroneous judgement is due to the perception of things under the category of bodies and the susceptibility of the subject to unreflective passions and habitual thinking, such as when one

⁴ Gilson, *La liberté chez Descartes et la théologie* 267. The references to Aquinas are from St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, New York: Benziger, 1948.

⁵ Gilson, *La liberté chez Descartes et la théologie* 275–276.

judges a possibly poisonous apple to be edible as a result of the inculcated habit in thinking so or as a result of the wish that it be so (377). This appears to invite Maritain's charge that the will is determined through the intellect. The contemporary commentators who defend Descartes, such as Cottingham and Petrik, have therefore attempted to establish a compatibilist doctrine of freedom in Descartes, such that it is in some respects like Spinoza's system, in which it is argued that freedom is compatible with the determinism implicit in the truth of the sciences.

While developing Descartes' response to Gassendi, Petrik contends that "to will something," in Descartes, "is simply to have a perception that carries conative weight,"⁶ and the feeling (the "conative weight") of being free is due to the self-explanatory character of clear and distinct ideas (57).⁷ One's own sense of being self-determining is due to the self-sufficiency of clear and distinct ideas, while one's sense of being determined to think and to act is due to one's having empirical ideas, or ideas of sensory experience, which depend for their truth and reality on their relation to objects external to the mind. In as much as a rational idea contains its own ground, the experience of being determined through such an idea is an experience of being self-determining, or spontaneous.

This appears to respond to Gassendi's objection while admitting the truth of a compatibilist doctrine of freedom of the will. This was apparently Spinoza's objection to Descartes' doctrine of the will. This objection is commonly seen as the claim that the indifference of the will in relation to the intellect is impossible, owing to will's being in a certain way identical to, and thus determined through, the intellect (E2P49Cor, E5Preface).⁸ Cottingham examines Spinoza's objection and defends Descartes on grounds that his system is really more like Spinoza's than Spinoza seemed to realize. When Descartes suggested that the will is able to withhold its assent from inadequate ideas, this was not to be seen as an irrational process: the "will is employed not in 'suspending assent' *tout court*, but on the decision to explore arguments which provide reasons for doubt."⁹ The intellect in Descartes, therefore, ought to be considered to have priority over the will in a manner compatible with its freedom.

But this is not the only way of reading Spinoza. Using the example of the idea of a triangle in the demonstration of the identity of the affirmation of the triangle and the idea of it in the intellect, he asserted that the affirmation of the triangle

⁶ James M. Petrik, *Descartes' Theory of the Will*, Durango, CO: Hollowbrook Publishing, 1992, 112.

⁷ Petrik 115–117.

⁸ Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, ed., trans., E.M. Curley; intro. Stuart Hampshire, London: Penguin, 1996.

⁹ John Cottingham, "The Intellect, the Will, and the Passions: Spinoza's Critique of Descartes," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 26(2): 246–247.

"pertains to the essence of the idea of the triangle" (E2P49Dem). As the essence of a thing is something in which the whole nature of the thing is given, according to Spinoza (E2D2), this suggests that in fact Spinoza agreed that the will has priority over the intellect. His objection to Descartes is that he failed to adequately develop the will's priority, as opposed to failing to recognize the intellect's priority.

This is supported by an interpretation of Spinoza on which "intuitive knowledge" takes precedence over the rules one adopts uses to develop true ideas (E2P40Schol2). Such intuitive knowledge derives from consideration of the "attributes of substance" (E2P40Schol2) as objectively constituting its essence (E1D4). On this reading, Spinoza identified the attributes with the "infinite modes," or the infinite ways of being of the one reality, or substance (E1P14). Although in a letter to de Vries, Spinoza gave the "infinite intellect" in response to a request for an example of an "immediate infinite mode" (Ep64),¹⁰ if the will has priority over the intellect, i.e., the order of the intellect, its immediate infinite mode would be "affirmation and denial"; the infinite intellect, in the sense of the structure, or relational reality, of this substance, would be the "mediate infinite mode," i.e., one derived from the nature of affirmation as the immediate infinite mode (E1P22). The will in the sense of the affirmation of ideas would be prior to the intellect in the experience of the subject in the sense of being something from which the order of the intellect is derived. The will has in this sense priority over the intellect in developing true ideas.

Taken in itself, the essence of substance would be a qualitatively distinct intuition of the potentiality of being, according to this reading, such as the intuition of the affirmation of ideas; the intuition of the "motion and rest" of bodies would be the immediate infinite mode of extension, and insofar as this intuition is realized in the order of the intellect, the immediate grasp of this order in extension would be the mediate infinite mode of extension, i.e., the face of the whole universe" (Ep64). Where Spinoza insisted that there is really only one substance, which is both body and intellect, this meant that the two attributes of which we are conscious are two ways of intuiting the one order of things (E2P7Schol).

The problem Spinoza saw in Descartes' theory of error went back to Descartes' failure to recognize that thought is an attribute of the same substance as extension, which led to Descartes' failure to distinguish the two attributes as diverse ways of intuiting one and the same order of things in the intellect. This distinction is needed to give content to the idea of the infinite potentiality of being, as affirmation as opposed to motion or as motion as opposed to affirmation. Without this distinction, the will is a meaningless indeterminacy and

¹⁰ Benedictus de Spinoza, *The Letters*, trans. Samuel Shirley; intro., notes S. Barbone, L. Rice and J. Adler, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995.

its only determinacy derives from the order of the intellect. But this contradicts the will's priority. Although this is the problem Spinoza saw in Descartes, a specificity of the will, in the sense of a qualitatively distinct intuition of ideas, is implicit in Descartes, and this explains the ability of the Cartesian system to respond to the pressure Gilson applied. The quality of being is distinguished through the intellect, but the order of the intellect is determined by reference to the quality of being.

This implicit response to Gilson can also be developed to withstand Maritain's objections concerning freedom and truth. Maritain's conception of truth derives from St. Thomas. As with St. Thomas, an idea is true, according to Maritain, "when the identification effected by the mind between the two terms of a proposition corresponds to an identity in the thing," and the method to discover the truth is to resolve "our thought into the immediate assertions of sensible experience and the first principles of the understanding in which our knowledge cannot be false because it is intuitively and immediately ruled by that which exists."¹¹ This is actually a lot like Descartes' view of truth. The paradigm of truth is still the intellect's awareness of itself: "that apprehension of being is absolutely first and is implied in all other intellectual apprehensions,"¹² i.e., an idea whose truth is given in its being identical to its object. But in Descartes, the criterion of clarity and distinctness restricts the mind's true ideas to those of the mind's own reality, whereas reality comprises far more than the order of the intellect. The true idea must be grounded in an external reality, and "the proper function of judgement consists in making the mind pass from the level of simple essence or simple *object* signified to the mind, to the level of *thing* or subject possessing existence (actually or possibly), a *thing* of which the object of thought (the predicate) and the subject of thought (subject) are intelligible aspects."¹³

The source of this conception of truth is the Aristotelian doctrine of knowledge of singular things, as developed by Aquinas. According to Aristotle, "actual knowledge is identical with its object ... the sensitive faculty already was potentially what the object makes it to be actually" (431a, 1–6),¹⁴ and "to the thinking soul images serve as if they were contents of perception That is why the soul never thinks without an image" (431b, 14–17). A sensory idea is thus identical to its object in as much as an abstract idea resembles the given reality of the image. Aristotle understood that the entities of mathematics exist separately from the singular in the intellect, but, by contrast to Aquinas, also

¹¹ Jacques Maritain, *Distinguish to Unite: The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan, New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959, 88–89.

¹² Maritain, *Degrees of Knowledge* 94.

¹³ Maritain, *Degrees of Knowledge* 97.

¹⁴ See "De Anima," Richard McKeon, ed., intro., *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, New York: Random House, 1941.

understood the intellect to perceive these and itself independently of the sensual image (431b, 14–18; 430a, 2–5).

Aquinas seemed to remark on the contradiction in this and to insist that for the human mind, the object is never without the image (Ia 87, 1). Thus, Aquinas argued that the finite “intellect knows directly the universal But indirectly, and as it were by a kind of reflection, it can know the singular,” and this reflection must be grounded in passive sensory experience, as “even after abstracting the intelligible species, the intellect, in order to understand, needs to turn to the phantasms in which it understands the species” (Ia 86, 1). Although the intellect has direct knowledge of the abstract idea of itself, the intellect directly comprehends the reality of itself through the sensory experience of the self. This preserves the distinctness needed to ensure the objectivity of knowledge.

A true idea is thus determined through the subject’s passive experience of the idea’s object. The order of the “intellectual object” only describes the possible; that of the “sensory object,” the contingently real. The Cartesian idea, according to Maritain, reveals only the intellectual object.¹⁵ It fails to establish its reality. Although in the infinite intellect, the concept is in its comprehension indistinguishable from the nature of its object, the finite understanding needs to search beyond itself to grasp its own reality or the reality of any singular nature.

The abstract idea in the intellect is thus true as a function of its being determined through the external reality of its object. But the will, in contrast, is free owing to its being determined through the abstract idea in the intellect. The will is more often determined through the idea of the physical forces encountered in sensory experience and the system of bodies explained in mathematical physics. At these levels of abstraction, ideas of sensory qualities and ideas of “quantity, number or the extended taken in itself” fail to account for the freedom of the will. They depend for their truth on external reality encountered through the sense, or their “matter,” whereas ideas of Maritain’s “third degree” of abstraction are true independently of their individuating matter, “whether they never exist in matter, as in the case of God and pure spirits, or whether they exist in material as well as in immaterial things, for example, substance, quality, act and potency, beauty, goodness, etc.”¹⁶ Although such ideas depend for their truth on the independent reality of the spirit, the self finds itself in this reality and becomes self-determining through identification with the abstract idea of this reality. As explained by Allard, the role of the intellect is to introduce the idea of the common good, in contrast to the particular goods encountered in sensory experience. Although the will is thus a desire determined to pursue this common

¹⁵ Maritain, *Degrees of Knowledge* 91.

¹⁶ Maritain, *Degrees of Knowledge* 35–36.

good, it is free with respect to such lesser goods. The will is free of the obsession with particular goods in being determined through the immaterial idea.¹⁷

As a result, the self's participation in the idea of the common good is progress in the direction of becoming a person related to the community and to God.¹⁸ By identifying with this concept, the inchoate self found in the sense and passions develops into who is free and responsible. A separation of the reality of the self from the idea of the self, however, is needed to account for the freedom of the will. The choice of the common good is not to be seen as determined in the intellect; rather, it has to be seen as motivated by a "conatural knowledge" of the common good.¹⁹ In the same way as the sensory subject perceives the independent reality of the sensory object, the agent perceives passively the reality of the common good. This conatural knowledge is, according to Maritain, an inclination to the good that the agent has in perceiving the idea of the common good independently of the agent's or anyone's self-interest.²⁰ The realization of the self in the form of the common good thus derives from a feeling the subject has about the order of the community of the common good, rather than deriving from an understanding of it. Descartes' argument in Meditation 3 suggests, in contrast, that this self-realization occurs necessarily as a function of the complete system of clear and distinct ideas and is not free.²¹

These objections rely on consideration of the *cogito* with an emphasis on the immediate grasp of the concrete order of the subject's experience, which makes this an abstract idea in one of the two senses explored by Aquinas: one in which the universal is abstracted from the particular and the other in which "the form is abstracted from the matter, as the form of a circle is abstracted by the intellect from any sensible matter" (Ia 40, 3). The idea of the self for the scholastic is developed through the former type of abstraction as its essence (Ia 85, 1), and the neo-Thomist thus interprets Aquinas's remark that "only an agent endowed with an intellect can act with a judgement that is free, in so far as it apprehends the common note of goodness; from which it can judge this or the other thing to be good" (Ia 59, 3). Whereas the neo-Thomist highlights the first, the Cartesian emphasizes the second type of abstraction.

This emphasis on the second type was needed to overcome difficulties with the first. If the true judgement fails to explain its relation to the reality of its object,

¹⁷ Jean-Louis Allard, "La personne humaine et la liberté," *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa* 51(4) (1981) 624.

¹⁸ Allard, "La personne humaine et la liberté" 622.

¹⁹ Allard, "La personne humaine et la liberté" 628.

²⁰ Jacques Maritain, *The Range of Reason*, New York: Scribner's Sons, 1953, 23.

²¹ Jean-Louis Allard, *Le mathématisme de Descartes*, Ottawa, ON: Éditions de L'Université d'Ottawa, 1963, 211–212. See also Jacques Maritain, *The Dream of Descartes: Together with Some other essays*, trans. M.L. Andison, 1944; Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1969, 100.

then the series of true judgements needed to explain the truth of any one is infinite, such that the true judgement never provides a complete understanding of its object. For the neo-Thomist this incompleteness ensures the freedom of the will; the will is otherwise determined through the concept. This is in part the point Lucas makes in discussing Gödel's incompleteness proof for mathematics.²² One can always form the judgement that "this judgement does not follow within the system of reality as currently conceived." This judgement is true if the system is, as denying it implies that the system contains this as a theorem and the judgement is that it is not in the system; the system would therefore imply a false judgement. The solution is to allow that the system is always incomplete, and this ensures the freedom of the will because, as in mathematical physics, it implies that the will is free with respect to this system in as much as it is possible for the agent to act in accordance with a more complete systematic understanding in ways not determined in mathematical physics. One's freedom is therefore relative to a given systematic understanding developed in the intellect, but it is always possible to be free with respect to any given systematic understanding.

However, if freedom is in this way relative to the more complete system, this conception of freedom is open to the objection developed in the work of Honderich: the relation of the system of the real is a judgement that is determined through a further relation of this judgement to reality; in other words, it is an event in "time," as a function of the subject's progress in the systematic understanding of his or her experience. Alternatively, if the idea of the real is on some level timeless, one can ask how the timeless concept is related to the reality of the self,²³ because again the objectivity of the idea depends on its being distinct from its object. Nor can the solution to this problem derive from adopting an "affirmative" outlook, as Honderich suggests,²⁴ if this is simply working to further one's ends in terms of the currently accepted idea of the real. This is either pure determination in terms of this system or its relation to the real is unknown, and the will is neither free nor determined but indeterminate.

Whereas it is true, as Maritain also observed, that the truth of the idea depends on the relation of the abstract idea to reality, with Descartes the abstract idea of the quality of the affirmation of ideas determines the concrete reality of the mind's experience, and this is a reliable approach to the discovery of true ideas if this quality of being distinguishes the actuality of the concept. To demonstrate this is the objective of the ontological proof developed in Meditation 5. This demonstrates the necessary existence of the idea of the infinite quality of the affirmation of ideas, such that the quality of affirmation is therefore a "common

²² J.R. Lucas, *Freedom of the Will*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970, 124–129.

²³ Ted Honderich, *How Free Are You? The Determinism Problem*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, 41–43.

²⁴ Honderich 111.

nature,” to use Spinoza’s term, or something everywhere the same (E2P40Schol1), and through the idea of this quality, one can develop true ideas about the structure of things.

As well, Descartes would have agreed that freedom depends on the mind’s comprehension of the abstract idea of the good, but this is the quality of being spontaneous abstracted from the experience of being determined through clear and distinct ideas in the intellect. In itself, it is without form and indifferent. But this quality of indifference distinguishes the greater spontaneity derived from a more comprehensive idea in the intellect. It is impossible to otherwise conceive of the freedom of the will. The self-knowledge of the agent is incompatible with freedom if the nature of the agent is determined through the structure of being. Self-knowledge would be incompatible with freedom unless such knowledge determines itself through the quality of being opposed to any given structure.

One can ask therefore whether this is ever a genuine experience of freedom or really one of being unconsciously determined. Maritain contended that the order of being precedes the quality, or intuition, of being and that being cannot be distinguished from the order in which it is defined: “Everything which differentiates it comes from within it, as one of its modes, presented to the mind by another concept.”²⁵ The quality of being is inconceivable except in relation to being; in other words, the quality of being is necessarily related to being as a predicate of a judgement is related to its subject. Thus, an interpretation of being is involved in the idea of the intuition of being, and the subject’s qualitative experience is either self-determined through the abstract idea or determined through a system of abstract ideas of which the subject is unconscious, such as class interest, flattery or subjective impulse.

Although intuition must be related to the real, the relation is one of opposition to its structural features. With Descartes, this results in an abstract identity of affirmation and idea, such that the quality of affirmation is without determinate nature apart from the structure of the idea. Spinoza, in contrast, determined the nature of the quality of being in thought through the range of the attributes as qualitatively distinct immediate intuitions of the order of the intellect. This gives the quality of being a determinate nature within this order while giving the quality of being an independence needed to determine the reality of this order in the intellect. In other words, Descartes’ development in the structure of thought is needed to distinguish the quality of indifference as a quality of being defined in opposition to any structure, whereas this quality of being, when modified through the structure of the idea of the systematic reality of thought, is needed to determine the conceivability of the idea. As a result, Maritain’s argument is acceptable as the argument that the intuition of being must be interpreted to be

²⁵ Maritain, *Degrees of Knowledge* 211.

specified, but this is compatible with the intuition determining the conceivability of the idea.

Spontaneity occurs as a modification of indifference. A type of spontaneity distinguishes the quality of indifference as it is found in extension or thought. Extension is the intuition of the motion of bodies experienced through the structure of their external reality, and thought is the intuition of the systematic order of ideas in the mind. The idea of the common good is arguably a ground to distinguish another unique intuition of being, as the structure of this idea is the type of systematic order in which the good for self-reflective agents, even the most elementarily self-reflective, is realized. But the reality of this idea as something affecting these agents depends its being possible to preserve the quality of indifference in the ways they conceptualize their relationship with this idea. Although the quality of indifference is worthless in itself, it is essential to the agency derived from the idea. Without it, the person would be lost in the idea, as a person cannot be divorced from a quality of being defined in opposition to any determinate structure.