PHILOSOPHY AND CULTURE: THE ROLE OF RELIGION?

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between philosophy and culture. It contends that contrary to common understanding, it is philosophy which determines the unity of a culture. Yet this is an active and ongoing process. In our unifying and very diverse world, it is philosophy which has the task of providing a new humanism, by identifying those common values and ideas that ground individual cultures and that complement, in their diversity, the one culture of humanity.

Fifty years ago, while developing what may be called his 'philosophy of culture', Jacques Maritain stated, "What determines the unity of a culture is first and above all a common philosophical structure, a certain metaphysical and moral attitude, a common scale of values—in short, a common idea of the universe, of man and of life, of which the social, linguistic, and juridical structures are, so to speak, the embodiment."[1] Such a formulation seems to suggest that culture has emerged from philosophy, not the other way around. To be sure, from ancient times until the present, philosophy and culture have been intertwined, but the challenge is to determine the precise cause/effect nature of this relation in each era and to point out its consequences. Though a daunting task, it is a crucial one, since the difference in approach makes all the difference when it comes to that which really matters for our world in the present moment: the cultivation of *a new humanism*. Maritain, and many others like him in the last century, devoted their lives to the cultivation of this new humanism and consistently approached the study of culture in this context. Reflecting upon the way in which this new humanism could bring a new

and needed unity to culture, he stated that in essence it "render[ed] man more truly human and [could] manifest his *original greatness* by enabling him to partake of everything in nature and in history capable of enriching him."[2] Not a few philosophers of the last century saw this new humanism emerging, as the only alternative, from the ashes of what may now be described as the *in-humanism* of the two world wars—wherein the old monster of man's inhumanity to man took 'new' and unimaginably horrific forms. Writing just a few years before the end of World War II, Maritain wrote, "In my mind the notion of the present trials endured by civilization [is] inseparable from that of a *new humanism*, which is in preparation in the present death struggle of the world, and which at the same time is preparing the renewal of civilization…."[3] This renewal, as Maritain and many others realized, is not inevitable or necessary, but must be creatively sought after and freely chosen and discovered anew in each generation. "Culture," he writes, "is the expansion of the peculiarly human life, including not only whatever material development may be necessary and sufficient to enable us to lead an upright life on this earth, but also and above all the moral development, the development of the speculative and practical activities (artistic and ethical) peculiarly worthy of being called a human development."[4] Such moral development, of course, cannot be imposed from top-down structures or principles, but must be based on convictions that are born in freedom. A similar point was aptly put by Benedict XVI recently in his encyclical on Hope, when he wrote,

> "[W]e must acknowledge that incremental progress is possible only in the material sphere. Here, amid our growing knowledge of the structure of matter and

> in the light of ever more advanced inventions, we clearly see continuous progress towards an ever greater mastery of nature. Yet in the field of ethical awareness and moral decision-making, there is no similar possibility of accumulation for the simple reason that man's freedom is always new and he must always make his decisions anew. These decisions can never simply be made for us in advance by others—if that were the case, we would no longer be free. Freedom presupposes that in fundamental decisions, every person and every generation is a new beginning. Naturally, new generations can build on the knowledge and experience of those who went before, and they can draw upon the moral treasury of the whole of humanity. But they can also reject it, because it can never be self-evident in the same way as material inventions. The moral treasury of humanity is not readily at hand like tools that we use; it is present as an appeal to freedom and a possibility for it."[5]

When we return, in the light of all this, to our original quote concerning the relation between philosophy and culture, we are better able to see the value of the philosophical approach to culture taken by Maritain; he does not claim that the philosophical structure determines culture per se, but that it determines the *unity* of culture. This approach distances itself from the one that sees culture as a mere by-product of a top-down philosophical enterprise which restrictively applies broad principles in a mechanistic and deterministic way, emphasizing universality, but neglecting subjectivity and particularity. Although Maritain speaks about a common philosophical structure, which necessarily entails a certain metaphysical and moral attitude, it is crucial to see that by *common* he

does not simply mean *the same.* Though he speaks about a common scale of values and a common idea of the universe, of man and of life, he precludes a universalistic, deterministic, interpretation of the word *common* by noting that the embodying structures of this common idea, namely, the social, linguistic, and juridical constructions, are by nature diverse and subjective, and if they aren't supple enough to change, they die. Thus, the common idea of the universe, of man, and of life, too, must not be static; it must be open and dynamic, if it is to remain alive and fruitful. In this, he has certainly appropriated the Heideggerian emphasis on subjectivity, which played such a key role in the transition from modern to contemporary philosophy. It is well known that this emphasis on subjectivity enabled philosophers to begin appreciating the world's cultures as genuine philosophic sources, which, in turn, has brought us today to the threshold of what we may be able to speak about as a new philosophy for global times—a philosophy that is profoundly connected to a new humanism.

Now to speak of a new philosophy for global times is not to undermine what has been called the 'unity of philosophical experience' by important historians of philosophy, but to insist, rather, that genuine philosophy is always alive, growing and changing; growth presupposes continuity, just as seeds grow into roots and trees. Thus, in an attempt to generate new philosophical insights for global times it is important to focus momentarily upon this 'unity of philosophical experience' that constitutes the very history of philosophy; this will help to guarantee that the new insights will spring from the living tree of thought and will be able to provide not only fruit that looks delicious, but fruit that really is delicious, and nourishing at the same time.

In this context, then, I want to suggest that the whole history of western philosophy from Thales to the present is one magnificent *metaphysical drama* wherein the most genuine human sages, and indeed the entire human race, are caught up in a fierce and ferocious intellectual battle that almost completely transcends them, even though they occupy center stage in the conflict.[6] These lofty intellectual hostilities are ardently associated with an ancient and bitter spiritual dispute over the nature of *universals*. Glimpses of this struggle are seen only occasionally and only by the most attentive and astute philosophers. This sublime discord, to which all authentic intellectuals are drawn, is what defines metaphysics. Such metaphysical speculation, far from a pedantic ivy tower pondering, set in the historical context of a so-called myopic scholasticism, is at once the most basic and most exalted speculation possible—a reflection in which, to varying degrees, all people of all times, whether wittingly or not, are involved. For the essence of the dispute revolves around the very meaning and destiny of the *universal* "man." Thus, this metaphysical drama is the key to a proper understanding of history itself, for the question ends ultimately in demanding human persons to choose sides and to daily align themselves, as they "write" history, with either the violent and deceptive spiritual powers of iniquity and corruption, that are passing away, or with the kind and true sacred forces of goodness and beauty, that shall last forever. In a word, the dynamic discourse of *universals* is the most *universal* discourse of all.

After the advent of Nominalism and even after Cartesianism had attempted to radically reduce philosophy to mere epistemology, metaphysics stubbornly refused to give up its historical role of defining the very essence of the philosophical enterprise. One part of this Cartesian reduction consisted in trying to remove the universal ideas

from the mind of God, where Augustine, in his attempt to modify Plato's "exaggerated realism,"[7] had so masterfully placed them. Once Descartes had disassociated the universal ideas from the divine, his methodological decency compelled him to find the orphaned universal concepts a proper home. His devotion to this daring procedure finally came to an end when, with a masterful stroke of surgical precision, he delicately undertook to place the universal concepts into the very mind of man. But a surgical error had gone unnoticed during this grandiose epistemological experiment. And such an imprisonment could not last. The metaphysical debate emerged again and again in the most unlikely of places, much to the dismay of those who thought the controversy (associated as it was with theology at best and with religious superstition at worst) had disappeared forever. In the last century, for instance, when Willard Quine asked what mathematics was really all *about*, it quickly became evident that the three supplied answers, Logicism, Formalism, and Intuitionism, clearly corresponded to the traditional philosophical positions in regard to the question of universals, with Logicism corresponding to Realism, Formalism to Nominalism, and Intuitionism to Conceptualism.[8] In the words of Quine, "Classical mathematics . . . is up to its neck in commitments to an ontology of abstract entities. Thus it is that the great mediaeval controversy over universals has flared up anew in the modern philosophy of mathematics."[9] To his credit, Quine himself came down on the side of Logicism, thereby committing himself to a variety of realism. To be sure, neither modernity nor the arrival of post or late-modernity lessens the importance of the *universals* debate, in fact, they intensify it. Modern science and technology testify to both the significance of the debate and to the weighty consequence of coming down on the right side. In the case of modern

science and technology, of course, there is no contention over which side is the right one. If universals did not really exist, how could we ever refer to laws, for instance, which *cause* all specific electromagnetic spheres or fields to act in certain expected ways? If modern technology did not presuppose the genuine existence of universals, would we ever have confidence to stake our lives on the reliability of our cars and airplanes?[10] And those who think that post-modernity's deconstructionism[11] has toppled the western metaphysical tradition, have understood neither deconstructionism nor the *universals* quandary at the heart of the metaphysical tradition. The former is primarily, a response to, not simply a rejection of, the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, and thus counts as another contribution to metaphysics. Surely, both Husserl and Derrida strongly resisted certain systems of metaphysical programming, but this is not to say that philosophers of such magnitude weren't engaged in metaphysics. John Paul II description of phenomenology is helpful here, for he described it as "…first of all a style of thought, an *intellectual relation with reality*, whose essential and constitutive traits one hopes to *gather*, avoiding prejudices and schematism."[12] If this is an accurate characterization of phenomenology, who could imagine Derrida disagreeing with it,[13] and who could fail to see its important metaphysical implications? Besides, it is appropriate to call to mind here the famous statement of E. A. Burtt, in his monumental work, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Physical Science,* who wrote in the early part of the last century, "the only way to avoid becoming a metaphysician is to say nothing."[14]

Suffice it to say, then, that for our present purposes, any emergent philosophy for global times must also entail a new metaphysics that takes a clear stand on the question of universals. And whereas I do not see how any lasting and viable metaphysics can ever

unqualifiedly reject realism, I want to suggest that a new brand of philosophic realism emerges when we take seriously the possibility of cultures as philosophic sources. This new brand of philosophic realism *implies* the real existence of universals, but insists that no truly existing reality is entirely unitary, and that all realities and indeed all reality is constituted precisely through *relation*. Upon this approach, neither universal nor particular terms have any metaphysical or ontological meaning whatsoever except when defined in the context of an 'immanent intrinsic complementarity of at least *two* personal beings constituting *the* Absolute'. This particular expression comes from the work of a contemporary Spanish metaphysician, Fernando Rielo, who while accounting for the real existence of both the universals of description and the universals of definition, also significantly shifts the vantage point of the traditional question concerning "whether" or "where" the universal exists.[15] While considering the goodness and beauty of a light purple flower, for instance, the question now is not so much about "whether" or "where" the descriptive universal "purple" exists, or "whether" or "where" the universals of substance, "flowerness" or "colorness" or "beauty" or "goodness" exist, it is much more about "how" such realities exist in the sense of being what they are and *more* than what they are simultaneously, since his very notion of being is not simply that being is being, as in Parmenides, but that being is more than being, a notion of being that he tries to capture with the expression "*being* +". To say that no truly existing reality is entirely unitary, and that all realities and indeed all reality itself, all being, is constituted precisely through *relation*, is commensurate with the results of a series of conferences held in Indonesia that discussed the emergence of philosophy from the specific contributions of the cultures of Java. As the Council for Research in Values and Philosophy stated it

recently on their website, "Javanese culture has a distinctive notion called *Memayu Hayuning Bawono*. This notion has the phenomenological dimension that human consciousness is not a solipsistic entity but a disclosure. According to this cultural conception, human consciousness is not trapped within a microcosm (*bawono cilik*), but reaches toward the macrocosm (*bawono gede*). This brings new meaning to self consciousness and its ethical implication, for self-consciousness is not a substance, but a relationship. This suggests a radical shift in our ethical paradigm. It is not only by a categorical imperative that we develop ourselves through fulfilling certain universal maxims, but we are continuously developing an ethic of cosmic solidarity."[16]

This rich philosophical insight emerging from Indonesian culture is commensurate with the results yielded by the work of Rielo as he redefines and purifies the language surrounding the problem of universals by applying his understanding of metaphysical language as the *living transcendental definition*. The first term he purifies is the term *universal* itself. He rejects the notion of "universal," when that notion is qualified by the term "abstract." For Rielo, abstraction, in spite of the claims made by Hegel, Husserl, Frege, and Russell, to have introduced new and better usages of both the term and the process, always consists, for Rielo, whether in Ancient, Medieval, or Modern philosophy, of "extracting from a plurality something which is common to it in order to form a supposedly universal entity by separating it from the singular instances." Such a method is what Rielo calls a "*squinting* variety of metaphysical vision," and can only lead to the production of a concept lacking syntactic, semantic, and metaphysical meaning.[17] A further mistake occurs, according to Rielo, when this empty concept is "raised to the absolute" to serve as a universal, necessary, axiomatic and absolute principle. Such an ill-

formed procedure, rather than "augmenting a notion [in order to] discover its consistency, completeness, and decidability," acts to reduce the supposedly abstract property, whatever it may happen to be, say "flowerness" or "color" or "purpleness" or "beauty" or "goodness," in such a way as when separated from its singular instances, becomes a tautology so that "flowerness is flowerness," and "color is color," and "purpleness is purpleness," and "beauty is beauty" and "goodness is goodness." Needless to say, such statements are meaningless and can never help to realize the new humanism or 'ethics of cosmic solidarity' we desire. For Rielo, the "raising to the absolute" must confirm the singular (not the universal) character of relation. For this purpose, he introduces the term absolutivization rather than absolutization. Thus he *absolutivizes* all universal concepts in such a way that when we say, for instance, that the rose is beautiful, we are not saying that an abstract reality called "beauty" exists and that that particular rose participates in the abstract "beauty," but rather that a "singular" absolute beauty exists, which is constituted by a binity, that is to say, by at least two transcendent entities in complementary relation; this means that the singular "beauty" of that particular rose is "in" the rose in virtue of the two transcendent entities that constitute and sustain its existence. In this way, the *mystical* beauty of the rose is a *vestige* of the transcendent-relational (or divine) beauty. Now when universal concepts such as "beauty" or "goodness" are predicated of a particular human being, we are not to claim, just as we did not claim in the example of the rose, that an abstract reality called "beauty" or "goodness" exists. For instance, if we say that Joseph is "good," this does not mean that there exists an abstract reality called "goodness," in which Joseph participates. What exists rather, according to Rielo, is the singular Absolute Goodness, constituted by at

least two transcendent entities in relation. The singular goodness of Joseph is in Joseph, then, in virtue of the transcendent constitutive presence of the Absolute Goodness of the transcendent entities (or divine persons) in Joseph, who, in their relation with one another, constitute Joseph as *mystical* goodness of the 'divine' goodness. Now if we take the universal concept *man* or *humanity* and absolutivize it in the same way, something quite profound emerges. First, it necessitates the rejection of an abstract reality called "humanity", in which each particular human participates, and claims, rather, that the singular "humanity," of say, Joseph, is "in" Joseph in virtue of the divine constitutive presence of the Absolute "humanity," of the 'divine' persons in Joseph, who, in their relation with one another, constitute Joseph as mystical *humanity* of the divine *humanity*.

A serious objection from certain philosophical circles is easily anticipated here, since talk of divine or transcendent persons entails religion and revelation, which is not, some may argue, properly philosophical. However, if we take seriously the possibility of philosophy emerging from cultures, and also see that at the heart of every genuine culture, there is a profound religious tradition that has provided insights into the transcendent and mystical dimensions of human interiority and consciousness, then we should, I believe, accept these insights as properly philosophical. In other words, and to put it more simply, we must accept, at the least, that in their various traditions of religious revelation, religious cultures possess many ideas about the nature of man, the universe, and life that are reasonable, and it would be unreasonable (un-philosophical) to simply dismiss them out of hand.

Returning then, to the way a new metaphysical approach to the problem of universals can provide us with a definition of man that is dynamic, mystical, and even 'divine', and

one that complements an account of self consciousness as a relationship, rather than a substance, we are struck by the ethical implications of such a view in bringing about the new humanism. For those who would reject such a vision as idealistic and unattainable, I would suggest the way forward, somewhat surprisingly perhaps, by first pointing *back* to a period in history that in some ways provides a model for philosophers today, who see the value in eliciting philosophical insights from living religious cultures.

Beginning in the sixth century, and continuing well into the seventh, an explosion of philosophical insight occurred as a result of an extremely dynamic synthesis that can rightly be described as emerging from culture. Syriac speaking Christians, heirs to Mesopotamian and Jewish culture, living primarily in the regions of what are today Syria and southeast Turkey, began to translate, develop, and transmit ancient Greek thought and culture into Syriac. In the ninth and tenth centuries, the great Arab translators, under the patronage of the ‘Abassid Islamic dynasty, and in conjunction with these Syriac speaking Christians, who also knew Arabic and had begun to assimilate Arabic culture as well, began to translate this great and living heritage from Syriac into Arabic, thereby not only transmitting the ancient Greek wisdom, but substantially developing it. This latter stage, because of the geographical, political and economic realities at that time, also received the insights and wisdom of Persian, Indian, and (later during the Mongolian period) Chinese thought, culture and religion, making this period one of the most dynamic cultural and philosophical interchanges in history. The philosophical result was dynamic and long lasting, providing both the solid foundation and building materials for the further construction of what would come to be known as modern science and civilization, once texts were brought to Spain via northern Africa and translated into

Latin in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Even a cursory examination of what may rightly be called Arabic philosophy, (in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims all participated in developing) reveals that the fundamental impetus at the heart of this philosophical and cultural exchange was a religious one, overwhelmingly concerned with reconciling scientific insights with the similar versions of revelation contained in the Holy texts. These scientific insights were not merely the scientific achievements of Greek science transmitted to the West via Syriac and Arabic, in the precise form they were received, but, as stated above, were substantially developed by Oriental Christians, and then by Arab and Persian Muslims and Jews, aided to some extent, by insights from Indian and then later (in the Mongolian period) Chinese religious cultures. The crucial point here is that in the process of transmitting Greek science, those Jews, Christians, and Muslims concerned with reconciling science and revelation, actually moved the scientific and philosophical project forward; their concern to reconcile their religious truths with scientific truths did not hold science or philosophy back, but propelled it forward. With respect to science, the new achievements included "a far more advanced number theory and algebra, a new system of trigonometry, a medical corpus much greater than that available in the Greek world, and an entirely original theory of optics more powerful than anything known to the Greeks and that was not only to form the mathematical basis for the Renaissance art but also to inspire new directions in scientific practice."[18] With respect to the philosophical achievements, there were notable advances in ontology and epistemology; questions about whether the world was eternal or created in time pushed the ontological project forward, whereas questions concerning the existence of necessary causes in nature stimulated epistemological discussion. And needless to say, at the heart

of both the ontological and epistemological discussion, was the age-old question of universals. The deliberations in this regard naturally took up the question concerning the universal 'humanity', and quite often in the context a theological anthropology that laid particular stress upon the 'mystical' and 'divine' nature of the individual man in *relation* first to God and then to other personal beings, including angels and other human beings. It is not the time to explore the details of this medieval discussion, but again, the central point here is that progress, both scientific and philosophical, emerged as a result of open and dynamic interchange among religious cultures.

To return now, by way of conclusion, to the question of the cause/effect relation between philosophy and culture in the light of our reflections above, I suggest that since the unity of each individual person, like the unity of every individual thing, is constituted by being in relation to another 'thing' transcendent to it, then ultimately there is only one culture, the culture of man. But this one culture emerges naturally as many cultures springing from the rich diversity that each individual man is by nature. The unity and development of distinct cultures, as well as the deeper unity and development of the one 'culture of man' is not natural, however, in the sense of being automatic, they must be chosen and appropriated anew by each new generation if they are to endure. This process of development is precisely the role of philosophy in that the philosopher, reflecting upon both the diversity and unity of culture and cultures, which is found as a given in the world, identifies those common values and ideas that ground individual cultures and that complement, in their diversity, the one culture of humanity. In this way a new humanism emerges wherein the individual person and peoples are simultaneously human and more than human—perhaps we should say *divine*: simultaneously one and many, changing and

immutable. This is what Maritain, and many others like him in the last century, devoted their lives to the cultivation of, and why they approached the study of culture in the context of a new humanism that could "render man more truly human and [could] manifest his original greatness by enabling him to partake of everything in nature and in history capable of enriching him."[19]

The philosopher, reflecting upon the unity and diversity of cultures, who can draw upon the treasures contained in the religious roots therein, is able to cultivate a balanced epistemology, wherein the objective, necessary, and universal dimensions of knowledge are properly complemented by the dimensions of subjectivity, the contingent, and the individual. Such an epistemology guards against the two extremes of moral and cultural relativism on the one hand, and against the scientistic terrorism and fanaticism of moral, cultural, and religious absolutism on the other.

[1] Jacques Maritain, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, rev. ed., trans. Evans and Peter O'Reilly (New York: Macmillan, 1958) 69. This quote, and the majority of the quotes from the writings of Maritain are taken from John A. Gueguen Jr.'s "Maritain's Philosophy of Culture: An Old Teacher Questions Himself About the Present Time." Gueguen's paper was originally presented to the American Maritain Association Conference on "Faith, Scholarship, and Culture in the 21st Century" at the University of Notre Dame on October 19, 2000. Gueguen's insights were of great help while developing the themes in this present paper.
[2] Ibid., 3. (my emphasis in italics)
[3] Maritain, *The Twilight of Civilization* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1943) viii.
[4] Maritain, *Religion and Culture*, in *Essays in Order*, ed. Christopher Dawson and T. F. Burns (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1940)
[5] Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi* 2007, 24.
[6] This statement and the material that follows on pages 5-8, ending with footnote 14, appeared in a slightly different form in the *Metaphysics Proceedings* of 2003, Second World Conference (Rome: Fondazione Idente di Studi e di Ricerca, 2004) as a brief overture constituting a suitable setting in which I addressed the main themes of that conference; I have included it here as it is highly relevant for the theme of this paper as well.
[7] These are the terms that Frederick Copleston uses to describe Plato's position on the nature of universals. Plato claims, of course, that universals are real things that exist apart from any particular object and are outside of the human mind.
[8] See Ed. L. Miller's *Questions that Matter* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998), pp.71f.
[9] Willard Van Orman Quine, "On What There Is," in *From a Logical Point of View*: *Nine Logico-Philosophical Essays,* second ed., rev. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 13f.
[10]See here the very fine article of Lawrence D. Goodall, "Of Universals, Angels, and Inklings," in the International Catholic Review *Communio* 29 (Fall 2002).
[11]The meaning of the term is much debated. Barbara Johnson's book, *The Critical Difference* (1981) is helpful in sorting out the plethora of meanings associated with the term.
[12]John Paul II goes on to say: "I would like to say it [phenomenology] is almost an attitude of intellectual charity toward man." This and the above comment (my emphasis in italics) were public statements of John Paul II when in March of 2003 he received a delegation from a World Phenomenology Institute based in the United States. See Zenit news: ZE03032407, March 24, 2003.
[13]With respect to the way in which the thought of Jacques Derrida can actually push the metaphysical project forward, see George F. McLean's key note address, "Metaphysics and Culture: The Bridge to Religion," at the conference "Metaphysics for the Third Millennium." This conference was an official event of the Holy See's celebration of the Great Jubilee, which was held in Rome, 2000. McLean asked whether ". . .the postmodern thought of Jacques Derrida, joined to the thought of Immanuel Levinas, [could] take us further as metaphysicians in the Judeo-Christian tradition?" In this regard, he referred to John Caputo's very insightful book *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).
[14] E. A. Burrt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Physical Science* (New York: Harcourt, 1932) p. 227.
[15]This statement and the material that follows on pages 9-11, concluding with footnote 16, also appeared in a slightly different form in the *Metaphysics Proceedings* of 2003, Second World Conference, referred o above in footnote 6. Again, I have included it here in a revised from because of its relevance to my topic.
[16]See http://www.crvp.org/conf/2007/java.htm. Accessed on June 28 2008.
[17] I must acknowledge the work of Father Robert Badillo here, who, at my request, so graciously translated into English portions of Rielo's *Mis Meditaciones Desde el Modelo Genético.* I can give no page-number references as the English translation edition is still under preparation. These quotes, however, come from the section titled, *From Prior Question*.

[18] See Arun Bala's *The Dialogue of Civilizations in the Birth of Modern Science* (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2006) 53-54.
[19]Maritain, *St. Thomas Aquinas*. 3.