

## Jacques Maritain, “Pure” Nature, and the State’s Teleological Crisis

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**Abstract:** In response to increased threats of totalitarianism in the twentieth century, Jacques Maritain proposed a separation of the spiritual and temporal planes which purported to limit State power and resist the totalitarian and absolutist claims found in rising political movements. I argue, however, that the very distinction Maritain attempts to establish pushes the temporal plane into a teleological crisis which results in the totalitarianism Maritain sought to resist. By granting that temporal powers pursue ultimate ends autonomous from humanity’s absolute ultimate end, Maritain’s schema yields an unstable temporal plane which requires supernatural claims to make itself intelligible as ultimate end. Whereas William Cavanaugh criticizes Maritain for mistakenly relying upon a scholastic understanding of “pure nature,” I propose that a recovery of Thomas Aquinas’s understanding of the openness of nature to supernatural ends can better justify Maritain’s proposed limited state and prevent the teleological instability at the root of Maritain’s political theory.

Jacques Maritain sets the distinction between the temporal and spiritual planes as a foundational feature of his political philosophy. Maritain thought that such a distinction could resist the totalitarian State which claims that no human goods exist outside of the State’s domain. Furthermore, he saw Christ’s command to “give what is Caesar’s to Caesar, and that which is God’s to God” as the evangelical justification which separated the temporal and spiritual planes and purified the pagan world from the perpetual temptation to collapse the supernatural into the natural for its own worldly purposes. However, the fundamental separation upon which Maritain grounds his proposal is significantly more unstable than Maritain recognizes. In fact, it is inherently so.

By distinguishing the temporal from the spiritual and establishing “ultimate ends” within each plane, Maritain deviates from what Thomas Aquinas considered a single chain of ends. I argue that this separation causes intrinsic instability in the temporal plane and pushes that plane into a teleological crisis, resolved only through temporal powers claiming to supply even supernatural goods—precisely what Maritain sought to prevent. By drawing on recent scholarship on the hypothetical state of “pure nature,” I argue that the temporal plane

must be understood as an intermediary end within a single teleological chain which finds its ultimate end in God alone. While William Cavanaugh's critique in *Torture and Eucharist* accuses Maritain of relying too heavily on the concept of "pure nature," I argue that rightly understood "pure nature" provides the necessary metaphysical foundation for the limited State Maritain seeks to establish. Furthermore, while Cavanaugh's criticism emphasizes the State's desire for ever greater power, attention to this teleological account provides a metaphysical explanation for why temporal powers seemingly inevitably claim to be repositories of ultimate identity and sacred value and become the idols against which he so forcefully argues.

To do so, I will first present Maritain's political schema and the metaphysical distinction he draws on his own terms. Second, I will turn to Cavanaugh's critique to show how the nature-grace debate informs political theology. Finally, I will turn to Thomas Joseph White's recovery of the usefulness of the concept of "pure nature" to show how, when properly understood, human nature situates all human goods within a single chain of ends. This provides an anthropological and ontological explanation of political absolutism and the sacralization of the State.

Ironically, both Maritain and Cavanaugh describe their work as arguments against these absolutist temporal powers. By properly situating human nature's relationship to supernatural ends, I offer a metaphysical description that both critiques and potentially reconciles these two influential Catholic thinkers.

## MARITAIN'S TELEOLOGICAL POLITICS

While appealing to metaphysics and teleology may seem at first to be an unnecessary and useless philosophical attempt to define and prescribe political structures, Maritain makes teleology essential and fundamental to his political scheme. It is not merely metaphysical window dressing to what might otherwise belong only to practical reasoning, but rather the foundational rock upon which he builds his political vision, to which he appeals throughout his political treatises.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in the preface to the 1939 English edition of *The Things That Are Not Caesar's*, Maritain notes that while the first chapter, devoted to articulating and applying Bellarmine's notion of indirect power, received the most critique and commentary, it is rather the third chapter that is "the most important" for his project. See Jacques Maritain, *The Things That Are Not Caesar's*, trans. J. F. Scanlan (London: Sheed & Ward, 1939), xxi. This chapter begins with a direct appeal to Thomas Aquinas's doctrine of nature and grace, and especially to the relation between the natural and supernatural ends, and continues with repeated appeals to the significance of Thomistic thought for his philosophical project (78ff.). In *The Peasant of the Garonne*, near the end of his laudable and impressive life, Maritain once again places teleology at the center of his thinking as he examines the lay vocation and

Maritain seeks to distinguish the natural, temporal goods of the human person from her supernatural, spiritual goods. Drawing on Thomistic teleology, he separates the temporal and spiritual into two autonomous planes, protecting the autonomy of both political and ecclesial authorities from threatening the goods of the other. He makes this distinction while still subordinating the temporal plane to the “absolute, ultimate end” of the spiritual. However, he modifies Thomas’s understanding of the ultimate end in order to better protect the autonomy of each plane by introducing two distinct ultimate ends. Such a claim contradicts Thomas’s argument for a single chain of ends and introduces instability into the temporal plane.

It would be a mistake to see Maritain’s project as merely theoretical; the threats he saw to the church’s freedom were not imagined bogeymen but real political developments. Maritain’s early work *The Things That Are Not Caesar’s* was written in 1927 in defense of Pope Pius XI’s condemnation of Action Française, a self-proclaimed integralist and royalist political movement that explicitly desired to use the spiritual goods of the church as a means towards civil unity and political power.<sup>2</sup> Action Française’s atheist leader Charles Maurras saw the church as a useful instrument that could provide stability and identity to France and thereby unify the State. While at first some Catholic voices saw a useful ally in Maurras, eventually the hierarchy would reject his co-opting of spiritual goods for the sake of political and temporal ends.<sup>3</sup> But it was not simply political movements in 1920s France which sought to use the spiritual for their own benefit. Beyond Maritain’s France, Mussolini in Italy likewise deployed religious rhetoric for the benefit of political gain.<sup>4</sup>

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Christian mission with respect to the temporal plane (*The Peasant of the Garonne: An Old Layman Questions Himself about the Present Time*, trans. Michael Cuddihy and Elizabeth Hughes [New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1968], 40–43, 199–212). In this article, I intentionally refer to “the State” and capitalize it to designate the post-Westphalian modern nation-state. This is to align my terms with how William T. Cavanaugh deploys the difference, as seen in his “A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House: The Wars of Religion and the Rise of the State,” *Modern Theology* 11, no. 4 (1995): 397–420.

<sup>2</sup> Maritain, *The Things That Are Not Caesar’s*, xxiv.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the political context in early Twentieth century France, with particular attention to Charles Maurras’s influence, see Michael Sutton, “Conservatives and Conservatism: Early Catholic Controversy about the Politics of Charles Maurras,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 14, no. 4 (1979): 649–676, dx.doi.org/10.1177/002200947901400405.

<sup>4</sup> Emilio Gentile describes how Mussolini made mythic thought and religious claims fundamental to his political imagination. These categories served to provide a transcendent purpose and identity to his political project. See Emilio Gentile, “Fascistese: The Religious Dimensions of Political Language in Fascist Italy,” in *Political Languages in the Age of Extremes*, ed. Willibald Steinmetz and German Historical Institute in London, Studies of the German Historical Institute London

In fact, Maritain begins his critique of Maurras by describing how ancient pagan society claimed authority over the whole human being, and “absorbed the spiritual in the temporal power and at the same time apotheosized the State.”<sup>5</sup> The temptation for temporal power to appropriate supernatural claims and sacralize itself is a constant presence in human history. As we will see later, it is not simply a temptation but the inevitable result of teleological instability.

The very first pages of Maritain’s response to Maurras reveal the divine command upon which Maritain will ground his political philosophy, to which he returns throughout his later political writings: Christ’s command to “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God, the things that are God’s” (Matt 22:21). Maritain considers this declaration by Christ to have instituted the perpetual distinction of the temporal plane from the spiritual plane and looks to Thomas Aquinas to provide a metaphysical explanation for this distinction.<sup>6</sup> Thomas recognizes the reality of both natural and supernatural desires, which arise from nature and grace. There is a real human nature, which desires ends proportionate and connatural to itself; there also are real supernatural desires which, because the goods desired transcend human nature, can only be moved by God.<sup>7</sup> Maritain sees in this distinction an elaboration of Christ’s distinction of Caesar and God. What pertains to humanity’s natural end relates to the temporal plane, and what pertains to humanity’s supernatural end relates to the spiritual plane. While not always apparent, Maritain treats as synonymous the terms temporal, earthly, and natural.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the eternal, spiritual, and supernatural are synonyms for the transcendent end in which grace elevates human nature to God. Each

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(New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 69–82. Maritain explicitly condemns Mussolini’s fascist project as an example of the totalitarian State which claims to be the end of all human activities, outside of which no human or spiritual goods exist. See Jacques Maritain, *Integral Humanism, Freedom in the Modern World, and A Letter on Independence*, trans. Otto A. Bird, Collected Works of Jacques Maritain, vol. 11 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 237, n. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Maritain, *The Things That Are Not Caesar’s*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> “[The primacy of the spiritual] presents itself to us under three different aspects which the Doctrine of St. Thomas, better than any other after the Gospel and St. Paul, enables us to understand. . . . By his doctrine concerning nature and grace and the subordination of ends, he makes us understand the primacy of spiritual over political ends and of the universal domain of grace over all the particular divisions of nature” (Maritain, *The Things That Are Not Caesar’s*, 78).

<sup>7</sup> For a survey of the debate regarding natural powers and supernatural ends within the Thomistic tradition, see “PaleoThomism? The Continuing Debate over the Natural Desire for the Vision of God,” in Reinhard Hütter, *Dust Bound for Heaven: Explorations in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 129–183.

<sup>8</sup> Maritain likewise uses the terms “plane,” “sphere,” and “order” synonymously to refer to the distinct ontological categories of the natural and supernatural. For consistency and clarity, I will only use the term “plane.”

plane has its own proper end as well as powers and authorities ordered to the attainment of that end.

On Thomas’s account, humanity has only one ultimate end (ST I-II, q. 1, aa. 4–8), which is the beatific vision and participation in divine life (ST I-II, q. 3, a. 8).<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, everything a person wills, they will either directly or as an intermediary for the sake of this single, ultimate end, whose attainment results in beatitude, or perfect happiness.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the intermediate and ultimate ends desired by an individual belong to a single chain of ends, in which either imperfect goods (intermediate ends) are desired as “tending towards a perfect good” or the perfect good is desired as ultimate end, “since the beginning of something is always ordered toward its consummation.”<sup>11</sup> Each intermediary good is desired explicitly or implicitly for the sake of attaining a higher, more ultimate good until at last one comes to rest in one’s ultimate good, which cannot be anything except “seeing God’s essence” (ST I-II, q. 3, a. 8). However, this end can only be attained by God’s grace, because human nature and its powers can only attain ends proportionate to itself. Since God transcends all nature, human nature requires grace in order for its rational powers to be proportionate to God as its ultimate end.<sup>12</sup>

Maritain’s proposal hinges upon a distinction between human ends appropriate to each plane and the proper autonomy derived from this distinction. In order to justify each plane’s autonomy, Maritain attributes “ultimate ends” proper to each specific plane. He provides

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<sup>9</sup> All translations of Thomas’s *Summa Theologiae*, unless otherwise stated, are from Alfred Freddoso, [www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/summa-translation/TOC.htm](http://www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/summa-translation/TOC.htm).

<sup>10</sup> For critiques of Thomas’s argument for a singular ultimate end, see Peter F. Ryan, “Must the Acting Person Have a Single Ultimate End?,” *Gregorianum* 82, no. 2 (2001): 325–356. See also Germain Grisez, “The True Ultimate End of Human Beings: The Kingdom, Not God Alone,” *Theological Studies* 69, no. 1 (2008): 38–61, [doi.org/10.1177/004056390806900102](https://doi.org/10.1177/004056390806900102). For a defense of a singular last end, and an articulation of the different ways in which an action can be referred to the last end, see Thomas Osborne, “The Threefold Referral of Acts to the Ultimate End in Thomas Aquinas and His Commentators,” *Angelicum* 85, no. 3 (2008): 715–736. See also William Mattison, “A New Look at the Last End: Noun and Verb, Determinate Yet Capable of Growth,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 8, special issue no. 2 (2019): 95–113, [jmt.scholasticahq.com/article/11427-a-new-look-at-the-last-end-noun-and-verb-determinate-yet-capable-of-growth](https://jmt.scholasticahq.com/article/11427-a-new-look-at-the-last-end-noun-and-verb-determinate-yet-capable-of-growth). For a defense of Thomas against Grisez’s critique, see Reinhard Hüter, *Bound for Beatitude: A Thomistic Study in Eschatology and Ethics* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2022), 416–426.

<sup>11</sup> “What is not desired as a perfect good must be desired as tending toward a perfect good, i.e., an ultimate end, since the beginning of something is always ordered toward its consummation” (ST I-II, q. 1, a. 6).

<sup>12</sup> “Seeing God through his essence lies not only beyond human nature, but also beyond every creature’s nature. . . . Hence, neither man nor any other creature can attain ultimate beatitude through his own natural power” (ST I-II q. 5, a. 5).

the clearest description in his later and perhaps most known work, *Man and the State*:

For human life has two ultimate ends, the one subordinate to the other: an ultimate end *in a given order*, which is the terrestrial common good, or the *bonum vitae civilis*; and an *absolute* ultimate end, which is the transcendent, eternal common good. And individual ethics takes into account the subordinate ultimate end, but directly aims at the absolute ultimate one; whereas political ethics takes into account the absolute ultimate end, but its direct aim is the subordinate ultimate end, the good of the rational nature in its temporal achievement.<sup>13</sup>

In the temporal plane, a person seeks those ends proportionate to human nature as such. These ends include goods such as organizing society, agriculture, and raising a family, and can be achieved without supernatural graces and insight. All proximate ends within the temporal plane are ordered to the ultimate temporal end: the common good of civic life, even if the individual “takes into account” their absolute ultimate end. The temporal powers that order temporal goods to the ultimate temporal end have exclusive and legitimate autonomy within this plane. This both gives the State autonomy in its own plane but also strictly limits its concerns to the “the temporal life of men and their temporal good.”<sup>14</sup> Or at the very least, it limits the State in theory.

While he makes a clear distinction between these planes, Maritain rejects an absolute distinction which sees each plane as equal and parallel. The temporal plane must always be understood as subordinate to the higher spiritual plane.<sup>15</sup> Humanity’s supernatural end transcends the natural, and likewise the spiritual plane is superior to and higher than the temporal. The spiritual plane alone is ordered to the singular, absolute, ultimate end of the person, beatific vision and participation in divine life. The authority on the supernatural plane is the church, and in so far as this plane is superior to the temporal plane, the church also wields certain authority in the temporal plane, as when the papacy denounces a temporal group such as Action Française and forbids Catholics from participating in it.

In order to protect each authority’s autonomy, Maritain deviates from a strictly Thomistic metaphysics and makes the surprising decision to refer to the ends of each plane as “ultimate” ends, where the temporal ultimate end is nevertheless subordinate to the spiritual ultimate end. This deviation from Thomas is absolutely essential to

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<sup>13</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1998), 62, emphasis in original.

<sup>14</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, 153.

<sup>15</sup> Maritain is clear that things which are not Caesar’s belong to a supernatural end transcending the temporal plane and having “higher place” and “higher dignity.” See Maritain, *Man and the State*, 148–154.

Maritain’s distinction of powers in each given plane. By avoiding the association of the temporal plane with a proximate end, Maritain can legitimize its proper autonomy. Within its proper plane, each authority acts as the highest power and directly towards its proper ultimate end. In order to clearly establish this autonomy, Maritain introduces two independent chains of ends, one temporal and one spiritual, each culminating in an ultimate end.

As Maritain develops his articulation of the distinct planes, we notice a change in language with regards to types of ends. In his 1936 work *Integral Humanism*, he explicitly describes the temporal common good as an “*intermediate end*,” or what he coins as an “*infravalent end*.”<sup>16</sup> Yet he elaborates that more precisely, the temporal common good can be recognized as an “ultimate end” in a given plane, yet subordinate to the absolute ultimate end. Nearly fifteen years later in *Man and the State*, Maritain drops any use of “intermediate” or “infravalent,” maintaining that the temporal is subordinate to the spiritual, and establishing each as proper ultimate ends. Maritain offers two different notions of what the ultimate end of the natural plane may be. As seen above, he explicitly describes the temporal ultimate end as the temporal common good. Later in the same work, however, he describes how the end of the temporal common good is relativized, even in its own plane. While the temporal common good is an ultimate end, it “is an ultimate end in a relative sense and in a certain order, not the absolute ultimate end.”<sup>17</sup> Maritain refers to a more traditional Aristotelian understanding, which subordinates even temporal goods to the higher natural end of contemplation.<sup>18</sup> He notes that even the common good is not the absolute ultimate end within the natural plane. There is hierarchy even here, so that the goods of society are subordinate to what Maritain terms “supra-temporal natural goods,” such as justice, love of fellow persons, the transcendentals of truth and beauty, and the natural beginnings of contemplation.<sup>19</sup> These supra-temporal goods are found and pursued in the temporal plane yet transcend what Maritain has so far described as the ultimate temporal end. As he notes, “even in the natural order, the common good of the body politic implies an intrinsic

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<sup>16</sup> Maritain, *Integral Humanism*, 237.

<sup>17</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, 149.

<sup>18</sup> Maritain even more explicitly ties the natural end of humanity to contemplation in *An Introduction to the Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*, where he states that in the natural order humanity is ordered to the contemplation of God in God’s effects, which nevertheless cannot perfectly satisfy the human desire to know God. In this work, Maritain anticipates our later discussion on the hypothetical state of “pure nature.” See *An Introduction to the Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*, trans. Cornelia N. Borgerhoff (Albany, NY: Magi, 1990), 90–110.

<sup>19</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, 148.

though indirect ordination to something which transcends it.”<sup>20</sup> Even within the temporal plane, human nature points to a good beyond the common good, towards a natural good proportionate to a person’s highest power: the actualization of the intellect in contemplating universal truths.<sup>21</sup> However, this cannot be considered an “absolute” ultimate natural end. For Maritain, there is only one absolute ultimate end, the supernatural end of life in God: “God is man’s beatitude in the supernatural order, but not in the natural order, because man has no beatitude in the natural order.”<sup>22</sup>

Relativizing the temporal common good serves a crucial function for Maritain: it delineates the powers and limitations of the State in the temporal plane. By clearly delineating the ends over which powers have authority, Maritain not only protects the freedom of the church but also describes a surprisingly limited State. The State is only a part of the body politic, the larger communal reality tending towards the common good and encompassing within itself all human temporal goods and relations.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, the State is the highest power of the body politic concerned with “the maintenance of law, the promotion of the common welfare and public order, and the administration of public affairs.”<sup>24</sup> Even though it is the highest temporal power, Maritain expects the State to play only the limited role of the “central agency” of the body politic, working for the sake of the temporal good and allowing the body politic and its constitutive guilds, organizations, groups, and individuals to pursue their proper activity and ends.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, 149.

<sup>21</sup> For Maritain’s most clear subordination of the temporal common good to the spiritual common good and the individual’s contemplation, see Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, trans. John J. Fitzgerald (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1947). Denis Bradley has argued that an intrinsic tension arises from Aristotle between the highest form of *eudaimonia*, found in pure contemplation, and Aristotle’s claim that humanity is by nature social and the highest form of certain virtues must be exercised in and for the *polis*. See Denis J. M. Bradley, *Aquinas on the Twofold Human Good: Reason and Human Happiness in Aquinas’s Moral Science* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 390–396. Kevin Flannery provides a history of this debate, especially recounting Maritain’s and Charles De Koninck’s influential contributions, and advocates for a relative understanding of the political common good in which the whole of political life is directed towards the good of contemplation. See Kevin Flannery, “The Common Good in Aristotle and Aquinas,” in *Self-Transcendence and Virtue: Perspectives from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology*, ed. Jennifer A. Frey and Candace A. Vogler, Routledge Studies in Ethics and Moral Theory (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2019), 160.

<sup>22</sup> Maritain, *Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 110.

<sup>23</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, 10.

<sup>24</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, 12.

<sup>25</sup> Bradley Lewis describes how Maritain’s Thomistic personalism frames his political theory and situates the temporal common good as “a good precisely for persons” and



The State, therefore, has only an instrumental role. Maritain explains the limitations intrinsic to the body politic and temporal plane, stating: “Political society is essentially destined, by reason of the earthly end itself which specifies it, to the development of those environmental conditions which will so raise men in general to a level of material, intellectual, and moral life in accord with the good and peace of the whole, that each person will be positively aided in the progressive conquest of his full life as a person and of his spiritual freedom.”<sup>26</sup> This need not be understood as some radically libertarian vision of the State. Robust healthcare systems, social safety nets, and any number of contemporary civil institutions are perfectly compatible with Maritain’s vision of the State. What we are left with, however, if Maritain’s vision were to be successfully implemented, would be an instrumental State whose function is to facilitate the conditions necessary for other associations and individuals to have the possibility of attaining their own ends while itself remaining subordinate to those ends. In fact, Maritain asserts that if human society attempted to liberate itself from this subordination to higher ends, “and to proclaim itself the supreme good, in the very same measure it perverts its own nature and that of the political common good.”<sup>27</sup>

This limited and functional understanding has a surprising resemblance to what Alasdair MacIntyre refers to when he compares the State to a telephone company. MacIntyre famously described how the nation-state is capable of furnishing certain temporal goods and services so long as it is appropriately small enough for real civic deliberation. In this way, it functions as a “bureaucratic supplier of goods and services,” which only seeks to provide the conditions by which citizens might pursue their true ends.<sup>28</sup> Such a State would allow the freedom not only for the church and religious believer to be most fully themselves, and various other public non-State organizations to pursue their own ends, but would also restrain itself and resist claiming higher ends than appropriate to its plane. MacIntyre contrasts this limited State with the totalitarian nation-state,

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the development of individual personality and flourishing. This personalist political theory was meant to oppose and resist the totalitarianisms of the mid-twentieth century but was itself attacked by Thomists in part for situating individual good in opposition to the common good. See V. Bradley Lewis, “Thomism, Personalism, and Politics: The Case of Jacques Maritain,” *Quaestiones Disputatae* 9, no. 2 (2019): 151–173, dx.doi.org/10.5840/qd2019929.

<sup>26</sup> Maritain, *Integral Humanism*, 237.

<sup>27</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, 149.

<sup>28</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “A Partial Response to My Critics,” in *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre*, ed. John Horton and Susan Mendus (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 303.

which presents itself as a “repository of sacred values.”<sup>29</sup> This sort of nation-state, which claims to supply identity and purpose while also purporting to be the supreme vehicle to achieve meaning, progress, and temporal happiness, has already collapsed into the perversion Maritain described by proclaiming itself a supreme good.

By uniting Thomistic philosophy and Christ’s distinction, Maritain gave the twentieth century a means by which a diverse populace could nevertheless unite to pursue temporal goods, while still subordinating these goods to human nature’s ultimate supernatural end. However, we shall see that by cleaving these two planes to two separate chains of ends, Maritain unwittingly built his distinction upon a fundamentally unstable foundation. We can see the cracks in the distinction by examining how Maritain understands Christian action in the temporal plane.

### CHRISTIAN ACTION AND THE BLURRING OF SEPARATION

How might a Christian, who knows that her ultimate, absolute end transcends the temporal common good, function in the temporal plane? According to Maritain’s vision, a Christian operates in the world according to the acquired virtues and seeks natural ends appropriate to the temporal plane. Maritain distinguishes between the action of a Christian and that of a Christian *qua* Christian.<sup>30</sup> The Christian is formed by the teachings of the Gospel and the church; she is directed to care for the poor according to Christ’s command, but nevertheless participates in the temporal plane as a citizen, not essentially *qua* Christian. The action of a Christian could be anything she does in the temporal plane: organizing a political campaign, cooking a meal, founding a business, etc. These acts are done by a Christian, no doubt. Yet these acts are properly temporal, they make use of natural powers and virtues, and do not directly have as their object supernatural ends.

The acting person, therefore, becomes the uniting reality which integrates otherwise separate planes. The person alone is “simultaneously a member of that society which is the Church,” as well as a member of the body politic, and therefore “an absolute division between those two societies would mean that the human person must be cut in two.”<sup>31</sup> Maritain sees that the Christian acts in the temporal plane for the sake of natural goods, but properly refers them to God indirectly. Even while pursuing such temporal goods as nutrition, the Christian can perform these actions with God in mind. Maritain thereby unites the two separate chains of ends, one

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<sup>29</sup> MacIntyre, “A Partial Response to My Critics,” 303.

<sup>30</sup> Maritain, *Integral Humanism*, 338.

<sup>31</sup> Maritain, *Man and the State*, 153.

subordinate to the other, not as one single chain as proposed by Thomas but as united only in the person herself. The result is that all actions are done by the singular human person, but according to the distinct planes and intelligible within their specific plane. For example, the fortitude of a Christian prosecutor seeking justice against organized crime utilizes the same powers and goods as that of the unbaptized fellow prosecutor in the same office. However, the purpose for the Christian prosecutor’s actions may be indirectly referred to God, such that she pursues natural goods but does so for the sake of a supernatural end. Nevertheless, Maritain considers these to be acquired virtues, performed by both Christians and non-Christians for authentically temporal ends. This distinction protects the reality of the natural goods while still allowing the Christian to refer these goods to God.

Despite his persistent efforts to maintain a complete distinction between the two planes, Maritain himself must introduce qualifying statements which shows the instability of this division. A ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ distinction cannot adequately describe all the actions that take place within the proper planes. In *Integral Humanism*, he introduces a third plane, partially uniting the separated two ends of human nature, which attends to those matters that do not fit exclusively within only one plane.<sup>32</sup> This intermediary plane contains spiritual matters interwoven into the temporal plane and “differs from the purely spiritual plane only by accidental distinction; the intermediary plane is the plane of the spiritual itself as inflected on the side of the temporal and joining the later.”<sup>33</sup> These include realities such as marriage, education, certain civic activities, and all temporal activity nevertheless directed toward a supernatural end.<sup>34</sup> In this third plane, a Christian is not merely acting in the temporal plane and indirectly referring their temporal ends to God. They pursue truly temporal realities with a direct reference to God. This plane is the realm of Catholic Action, where Christians act in the temporal plane for the sake of temporal goods, and do so *as Christians*.<sup>35</sup> These goods defy the absolute distinction between temporal and spiritual, and “while concerning the earthly city, they concern also, directly or indirectly, the good of souls and eternal life” and therefore “the Christian, as a member of the Mystical Body, has to consider them primarily and above all not according as they concern the temporal

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<sup>32</sup> See Maritain, *Integral Humanism*, 339–342.

<sup>33</sup> Maritain, *Integral Humanism*, 339.

<sup>34</sup> Maritain, *Integral Humanism*, 340–342.

<sup>35</sup> Maritain, *Integral Humanism*, 340.

order . . . but according to as they concern the supratemporal goods of the human person and the common good of the Church of Christ.”<sup>36</sup>

Maritain recognizes that supratemporal goods seem to reside in a gray area between the temporal and spiritual planes. There is something even within the temporal plane which does not seem restricted merely to that plane. Even certain temporal goods belong to a single chain of ends, not two independent ends as suggested by the distinction of the two planes. Maritain’s attempt to find stability by introducing an “intermediate” third plane only serves to crack the wall of separation Maritain constructs throughout his corpus.

### CAVANAUGH, DE LUBAC, AND HUMANITY’S SINGULAR END

Maritain’s argument depends upon a clear distinction between two legitimate, independent, though unequal, human ends. While Maritain primarily seeks to liberate the church from being co-opted by worldly powers, William Cavanaugh has accused Maritain’s distinction of preventing the church from speaking forcefully against temporal injustices. In his book *Torture and Eucharist*, Cavanaugh targets Maritain as the source of the deficient ecclesiology that silenced ecclesial authorities in the face of Pinochet’s regime of torture and terror against the Chilean people.<sup>37</sup> Cavanaugh argues that Maritain’s distinct planes reduced the church to an invisible reality, responsible only for the immaterial soul, and therefore ceded all temporal concerns to the authority of the State. While Cavanaugh’s primary concern is to show that the church must recognize itself as a real, material body with authority and concerns regarding temporal goods, Cavanaugh criticizes Maritain precisely because of the metaphysical distinction discussed above. His critique reveals that properly understanding the relationship between human ends is essential to political theology. However, despite Cavanaugh’s insightful critiques of Maritain and his insistence upon a single chain of ends, his own proposal is detrimental to properly understanding the relationship between humanity’s natural and supernatural ends.

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<sup>36</sup> Maritain, *Integral Humanism*, 340.

<sup>37</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998). Cavanaugh shows the influence Maritain had on the South American Church, and most especially Chile. He argues that Maritain’s distinction gave the state responsibility over Chilean bodies and the church responsibility over Chilean souls (*Torture and Eucharist*, 16). Because Pinochet’s torture regime targeted supposed enemies of the political body, the State alone had power over what occurred to these Chilean bodies. Cavanaugh argues that only by recovering a theology of the church as Christ’s *corpus verum* can the church properly understand itself as a real political body, instituted by Christ against the violent order of the world. See *Torture and Eucharist*, 15–18.

Cavanaugh critiques the foundational distinction Maritain attempts to forge between temporal and spiritual ends. He sees in Maritain the general failure of neo-Thomism, and accuses him of relying on the Thomistic commentaries of Cajetan, Suarez, and John of St. Thomas and their Thomistic school, which claims to find in Thomas a justification for a “pure nature,” an aspect of the human person wholly autonomous from humanity’s spiritual end.<sup>38</sup> Neither fallen due to sin nor elevated by grace, this “pure nature” gives the metaphysical justification for truly autonomous and independent natural ends. In this reading, while temporal ends are subordinate to spiritual ends, the temporal is nevertheless protected from any “permeation” of the spiritual into the temporal.<sup>39</sup>

The result, according to Cavanaugh, is a temporal plane sealed off from supernatural ends. However, a State in such a plane rarely limits itself to the restricted temporal goods over which Maritain grants it responsibility. Cavanaugh claims that the State, in order to direct a society to a common good, must accrue to itself the absolute power Maritain himself wishes to limit. As Cavanaugh retorts, “The State cannot be expected to limit itself to the body; it will colonize the soul as well. A secular faith will not stay long confined to some temporal sphere; the secular god is a jealous god.”<sup>40</sup> Even though Maritain notes time and time again that the temporal is subordinate to the supernatural, in reality what results is a “pure temporal plane” only subordinated to the supernatural by an interior disposition of the acting Christian, not by any metaphysical reality stitched into the created order.

Cavanaugh seeks to emphasize the complete transformation grace brings about in the life of the Christian, and rejects the idea that a Christian can seek “purely” temporal goods with only a minimal indirect reference to supernatural ends. Cavanaugh accuses Maritain of believing that Christian truth “is not directly applicable to concrete problems in the political and prudential sphere.”<sup>41</sup> At its most extreme, this distinct separation allows for practical and prudential natural reasoning which at times necessitates Christians in the world to “soil ourselves” through the toleration of lesser evils such as the use of police methods which “cannot help being rough” while securing peace and order.<sup>42</sup> By separating the two planes and claiming two

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<sup>38</sup> Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 183.

<sup>39</sup> Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 184.

<sup>40</sup> Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 196.

<sup>41</sup> Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 169.

<sup>42</sup> Cavanaugh cites at length the complete passages that follow Maritain’s distinction between the ultimate temporal end and the absolute ultimate end. He brings attention to the dangerous way in which Maritain’s distinction gives direct support to violent though “necessary” police action for the sake of securing the temporal common good.

autonomous ultimate ends, Maritain allows for a temporal plane subordinate to the spiritual in name only. Instead, “the very distinction of planes” eliminates any interference the church may have had against the State and erases the church as the material body of Christ on earth, with the result that “only the State is left to impersonate God.”<sup>43</sup> As Cavanaugh describes throughout his historical account of the Pinochet regime, this leads the State to insist that the church remain in its own plane, speaking only to matters of conscience, not matters of temporal concern such as what is to be done to the bodies of those “enemies of the State.”

Uncharacteristically for the adamant pacifist, Cavanaugh enters into the fierce nature-grace debate not as a peacemaker but with a sword. Drawing upon De Lubac, Cavanaugh considers Maritain’s position to be a gross distortion of Thomas’s theology of grace and the infused virtues. Christian action in the temporal plane must do more than merely ‘take into account’ the absolute ultimate end of God. For Thomas, rather, “The supernatural virtues *transform* the natural virtues to direct them to their proper end.”<sup>44</sup> According to Cavanaugh, when Aquinas says that charity is the form of the virtues, he does not mean that charity merely should be “‘taken into account’ while acting in history.”<sup>45</sup> Rather, Cavanaugh claims that supernatural virtues “transform” the acquired virtues and direct them towards their “proper end.”<sup>46</sup>

Cavanaugh critiques a two-tiered understanding of the human person by appealing to Henri De Lubac’s *Surnaturel*.<sup>47</sup> This work, Cavanaugh claims, “showed that the Dominican’s understanding of a hypothetical state of ‘pure nature’ and the resultant dual finality of human nature was nowhere to be found in Thomas.”<sup>48</sup> Following De Lubac, Cavanaugh claims that grace elevates and directs nature so that it might serve a new end which informs and touches all aspects of human life. Against Maritain, who considered it possible for a Christian to go about the world seeking temporal goods and entering into temporal projects properly speaking, Cavanaugh assumes that

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Cavanaugh shows how Pinochet’s Chile appealed to this distinction to justify police action against dissidents, police action which clandestinely included sophisticated kidnapping and torture. See Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 182; Maritain, *Man and the State*, 62–63.

<sup>43</sup> Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 193.

<sup>44</sup> Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 182, emphasis original.

<sup>45</sup> Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 182.

<sup>46</sup> Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 182.

<sup>47</sup> Cavanaugh reads De Lubac in no small way through John Milbank. For a critique of Milbank and a presentation of the wide agreement and remaining disagreement between the De Lubac school and various contemporary Thomists, see Nicholas Healy, Jr., “Henri de Lubac on Nature and Grace: A Note on Some Recent Contributions to the Debate,” *Communio* 35, no. 4 (2008): 535–564.

<sup>48</sup> Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 184.

grace in general, and charity in particular, ought to inform and transform all actions and virtues such that they are all now directed towards God.<sup>49</sup> The whole of the Christian has been shaped and elevated by grace, such that they might actually be able to obey Paul’s command: “whether you eat, or drink, or whatsoever else you do, do all for the Glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31). The Christian cannot remain unaffected, because where the waters of baptism reach, they elevate and sanctify, and there is no aspect of human life they do not reach.

Cavanaugh is right to criticize Maritain’s absolute distinction between the temporal and supernatural planes. While Maritain makes this distinction with laudable intention, the consequences are dire: by relegating the church to a mere mystical body, he cedes the material body to the power of the State. While Maritain wishes to see the State as a limited institution functioning only to allow other real temporal associations to flourish, instead his scheme tends towards the absolutist State he himself condemns. As Cavanaugh notes, this failure is actually unavoidable in Maritain’s schema. However, Cavanaugh’s emphasis on grace also leads him into dangerous waters regarding the good of human nature itself. By claiming that the supernatural virtues not only elevate human nature, but “transform” the acquired virtues and direct them towards their “proper” ends, Cavanaugh erases any possibility of natural human goods *qua* nature. Human nature is not merely elevated, but destroyed and replaced by something new when grace introduces a new end. But such violence can be avoided, as can Maritain’s State slipping into totalitarianism. We must navigate a different approach, which can unite Maritain’s two planes without destroying the reality and goodness of human nature.

### NATURAL OPENNESS, NATURAL INSTABILITY, AND THE TELEOLOGICAL CRISIS

While Cavanaugh and De Lubac are right to be critical of an absolutely separate and autonomous “pure” human nature, we can look beyond the late scholastic commentaries and recover Thomas’s own understanding of “pure nature” to discover a more secure metaphysical description of human ends. The concept of “pure nature” ought to be understood simply as a hypothetical through which Thomas can describe human teleology. By examining “pure nature” as a hypothetical

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<sup>49</sup> “In Aquinas, however, the supernatural virtues *transform* the natural virtues to direct them to their proper end. . . . Charity transforms both the status and the *content* of the natural virtues, which is precisely the importance in Aquinas’s account of *infused natural virtues*, which are essentially different from acquired natural virtues because of the end to which they are directed” (Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 182, emphasis in original).

state, we can come to appreciate that while ordered to real natural ends, human nature is also inherently open to supernatural ends. Such an openness relativizes the happiness that comes from attaining natural ends as “imperfect happiness” and reserves perfect *eudaimonia* for the single ultimate end of participation in the Divine Life. This reading reunites human ends within a single chain of ends. It also reveals inherent instability in natural ends when considered in themselves. This natural instability provides a metaphysical explanation for the State’s collapse into authoritarian absolutism: when the State claims to be, or is forced to become, an ultimate end, it enters into a teleological crisis it seeks to resolve through the stability found only in supernatural claims.

The concept of “pure nature” is not meant to suggest that at any point in creation there actually existed an ungraced, unfallen nature capable of perfect and complete happiness. Rather, “pure nature” is a hypothetical necessary for rationally describing what and how grace elevates. In order to understand what grace does to the redeemed person, we must postulate what the rational creature is capable of on its own. According to Thomas Aquinas, the human person is a strange composite. The human person is a union of material, sensible animality with the immaterial, rational soul capable of understanding and contemplating universals (ST I, q. 75, a. 4; ST I, q. 76, aa. 1, 5). Perhaps part of the trouble with which Maritain’s work wrestles is the problem that nowhere else in creation except humanity are material body and rational soul brought together in this way. This union complicates our understanding of humanity’s natural end. Human nature is capable of goods appropriate to its natural ends: it is capable of reproducing and raising children, proportionate to its animality. It is capable of living in society, and most importantly, of contemplation according to its rational soul. Because the rational powers of the soul are the highest and most noble powers, the ends to which they are ordered are appropriately understood as the highest human ends.

However, as Thomas argues through appeal to Aristotle, this natural end is itself unstable.<sup>50</sup> The highest good the human can achieve, the contemplation of the First Mover in its effects, is exceptionally difficult to reach, and even the rare few who do achieve it in this life do so only momentarily. Maritain himself recognizes this in *The Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*.<sup>51</sup> There, he sympathizes with the lament of the Book of Ecclesiastes, which bemoans that no

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<sup>50</sup> Aristotle notes that human contemplation cannot attain its perfection perpetually, but only intermittently, interrupted by exhaustion or death. Thomas reframes Aristotle’s argument in a Christian metaphysics, seeing that the imperfect happiness attainable by reason alone is properly understood as incomplete, but that the potential for perfect, perpetual happiness is found only in participating in the divine essence, which transcends the capabilities of human reason. See Bradley, *Aquinas on the Twofold Human Good*, 396–408.

<sup>51</sup> Maritain, *Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 89–110.



real happiness can be found in this life.<sup>52</sup> As Maritain notes, “If we had a purely terrestrial existence, Ecclesiastes would be right” in his existential lament.<sup>53</sup> The knowledge of the First Mover attained naturally only is of God’s effects, never of God directly. And so, the highest achievable good by natural means cannot satisfy; the ends of the temporal plane cannot provide the perfect happiness that ought to constitute an ultimate end.<sup>54</sup>

Nevertheless, humanity is not and has never been confined to a “purely terrestrial” State. That idea is simply a logical tool necessary to understand how grace perfects human nature without destroying it.<sup>55</sup> As Maritain’s fellow Thomist Thomas Joseph White has argued, “There must be at least *some concept of natural teleological ends* in human beings based upon *what* human beings are that can be identified rationally as a precondition for any narrative of human teleology, *theological or otherwise*.”<sup>56</sup> Only by attending to the hierarchy of humanity’s natural ends can we understand that grace elevates human nature without doing violence to it.<sup>57</sup> For White, this means recognizing that the individual’s natural desire to contemplate God through the rational powers is the necessary prerequisite to the

<sup>52</sup> “The highest act I am capable of concerning God in the order of nature, is to know Him by his effects, an act of philosophical contemplation which, even if it is experiential like the wordless contemplation of natural mysticism, will always remain knowledge seen as in mirror, enigmatic, incapable of uniting me really and directly with the divine object which yet must be my ultimate end” (Maritain, *Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 108).

<sup>53</sup> Maritain, *Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 96.

<sup>54</sup> “Thus, God is indeed the end I am turned toward; but from the point of view where I am placed, from the point of view simply of nature, it is an end which—even when I have quit the present life—does not fulfill me, does not satisfy all my capacity for desire. The philosopher is left facing a paradox: the absolute Good, the subsisting Good, is not existentially what it should be, namely my *total good*” (Maritain, *Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 108. emphasis in original).

<sup>55</sup> David Grumet has argued that De Lubac himself recognized this theoretical role of hypothetical “pure nature,” but also saw how after the hypothesis was introduced, it slowly reified into a real category. See David Grumett, “De Lubac, Grace, and the Pure Nature Debate,” *Modern Theology* 31, no. 1 (January 2015): 123–146, doi.org/10.1111/moth.12116.

<sup>56</sup> Thomas Joseph White, “The ‘Pure Nature’ of Christology: Human Nature and *Gaudium et Spes* 22,” *Nova et Vetera* 8, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 313, emphasis in original.

<sup>57</sup> This, for Thomas, is the meaning of *capax dei*, that human nature is naturally capable of God. If this were not the case, the elevation of nature’s end to God would make of the person something new. It would be violence upon the person, instead of perfection. As Hütter notes, “Because the human being, qua intellect and will, has been made capable for this end (*capax Dei*) by God such that human nature indeed is characterized by a genuine openness to and capacity for God. For this very reason, human nature is in no way transmuted into something else by being elevated to such a surpassing end” (Hütter, *Dust Bound for Heaven*, 141).

claim that grace elevates human nature such that it can now proportionately attain God as such. Human nature, therefore, is ordered to contemplating God in God's effects, but intrinsically open to this higher end.

What does this openness entail? As we have noted, the final end of human nature according to Thomas and Maritain is not the temporal common good. Rather, it is the natural contemplation of the first mover, God. This can be achieved by the natural powers of rational intellect alone. However, despite being humanity's natural end, humanity also seems unable to perfectly attain it. Aquinas develops Aristotle's notion of natural happiness, showing how the happiness of contemplation lacks the necessary characteristic of stability. As White explains, such a contemplation is "frail and can only be exercised periodically, rather than in an enduring way."<sup>58</sup> Because it is frail and incomplete, and knowledge is attained only indirectly through sensible realities, "the happiness it procures, while real, is also fundamentally incomplete."<sup>59</sup> Thomas terms it "imperfect happiness." It lacks the permanence that perfect, immediate knowledge of God and beatitude requires. Nevertheless, the human intellect "stirs up in us a desire for knowledge of something we cannot attain perfectly," the knowledge of God, a desire that only grace can fulfill.<sup>60</sup> By virtue of its ordering to the knowledge of God despite its inability to perfectly attain that knowledge, human nature is intrinsically open to this higher end.<sup>61</sup> White can summarize, therefore, that human nature has a natural capacity and desire to see God, while the human soul nevertheless "is in no way naturally inclined to the supernatural object of faith as such."<sup>62</sup> The instability of human nature's proper natural end is an essential reality pointing beyond itself to the only end which can actually satisfy that same nature. Only by carefully attending to this balance can we maintain a natural orientation to God while still preserving real but imperfect natural beatitude.

Although such a reflection has much to say to the nature-grace debate in general, it also provides a path to reconcile some aspects of

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<sup>58</sup> Thomas Joseph White, "Imperfect Happiness and the Final End of Man: Thomas Aquinas and the Paradigm of Nature-Grace Orthodoxy," *The Thomist* 78, no. 2 (2014): 275, dx.doi.org/10.1353/tho.2014.0015.

<sup>59</sup> White, "Imperfect Happiness and the Final End of Man," 264.

<sup>60</sup> White, "Imperfect Happiness and the Final End of Man," 275.

<sup>61</sup> White argues that Thomas cautiously balances his distinction between natural and supernatural ends on a razor's edge: "If we affirm too one-sidedly a merely natural end that is not constituted by the immediate knowledge of God, . . . we lose sight of the intrinsic orientation of the human spirit toward God himself. If we emphasize the latter inclination exclusively . . . then we will be obliged to deny that indirect philosophical contemplation of God is a truly teleological form of beatitude (White, "Imperfect Happiness and the Final End of Man," 277).

<sup>62</sup> White, "Imperfect Happiness and the Final End of Man," 282.

the otherwise divergent approaches of Maritain and Cavanaugh. Maritain and Cavanaugh both lament that the State seems to continually appropriate the supernatural for its own purposes. This happens in empires like pagan Rome, and also in modern nation-states such as Maurras’s France and Pinochet’s Chile. Yet by recovering Thomas’s carefully balanced distinction we can understand the metaphysical explanation as to why temporal powers continually seize upon the spiritual. Natural ends are not stable when isolated and siloed into their own plane. Human reason cannot attain its perfect beatitude by natural means, and to make a proximate end such as the temporal common good an ultimate end asks a lesser good to give more than it can provide. By attempting to build a clear division between the temporal and spiritual, Maritain actually allows for the unstable conditions that lead the State to grasp for a transcendent anchor.

It is not simply a historical reality that nation-states have established themselves as keepers of supernatural identity. This is a metaphysical necessity. Thomas claims that an individual can have only one ultimate end towards which all actions are directed and ordered. To have two ultimate ends renders human action unintelligible (ST I-II, q. 1, aa. 5–6). By making temporal goods into ultimate ends, Maritain throws the temporal plane into a teleological crisis. When the temporal attempts to justify itself as an ultimate end, when natural ends are seen not only as distinct but also separate from supernatural ends, they become susceptible to the same intrinsic instability found in humanity’s natural end. It must then justify and make itself intelligible as an ultimate end, which for Thomas means that it must “fulfill the whole of man’s appetite in such a way that nothing is outside of it that is left to be desired” (ST I-II, q.1, a. 5). In order to render itself intelligible and stable, the State must implicitly or explicitly propose an account of human nature and desire which finds its fulfillment in what the State claims to provide. It must become totalizing, and totalitarian.

This becomes evident most clearly in the ways the State violates the boundaries Maritain establishes and instead becomes a pseudo-religious institution and keeper of ultimate identity and meaning. The result is what Emilio Gentile describes as a “sacralization of politics” which “comes about every time any political entity, such as nation, state, race, class, or party, assumes the characteristics of a sacred entity, that is to say, a supreme power that is indisputable and intangible, and that becomes the object of faith, reverence, worship, loyalty, and dedication of citizens to the point where they are prepared to sacrifice their own lives.”<sup>63</sup> Durkheim famously describes the

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<sup>63</sup> Gentile, “Fascistese,” 75.

functional way in which religion operates in society, acting as a binding agent which unites societies and provides transcendental purpose and direction.<sup>64</sup> This was precisely how Maurras sought to use Catholicism. Recent scholarship has also analyzed the way in which nationalism operates as a “politicization of religion” and “messianisation of politics.”<sup>65</sup> The State begins not only to provide the conditions for human flourishing, but the sole and ultimate means to accomplish that flourishing. It seeks to make what can only be an imperfect end into an ultimate end, crashing the distinct planes together once again, but underneath the absolute State.

If such is the case, it seems any natural end can devolve into an absolutist institution. Why is it that nation-states become sacralized, and yet telephone companies rarely do? Based on the metaphysics of human nature presented by Thomas, it appears to occur only when natural ends are made to be ultimate ends and claim the authority to bring about that end. Were a corporation to do so, it would likewise enter a teleological crisis and need to bolster itself with supernatural meaning. But rarely, if ever, do corporations see themselves as anything more than instrumental realities seeking intermediate goods. Corporations therefore seldom enter into teleological crisis. Similarly, limited temporal powers such as cities are understood to be instrumental goods and therefore cities such as Paris or Chicago do not claim to be the keeper of the temporal ultimate end.

The temporal plane is unstable not because nature itself is unstable, but because humanity cannot attain perfection in nature. Any imperfect human end is intrinsically unstable. Any attempt to claim a natural good as an ultimate end necessarily puts that end on a path towards absolutism. While Maritain and Cavanaugh have attributed this to a desire for power, Thomas’s metaphysics suggests there is also an intrinsic metaphysical failure at the root of this teleological crisis. We find in Thomas that all conflicts do not inevitably boil down to base power games. The nation-state does not merely claim the soul because it can. It seizes the supernatural like a drowning person seizes a tree branch: it is the only thing that can save it from its inherent unintelligibility.

Here, we can deepen Cavanaugh’s own description of the rise of nationalism and provide a metaphysical description for the State’s temptation towards idolatry. Cavanaugh has outlined the historical developments that led to the nation-state as we know it, and the

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<sup>64</sup> See Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Carol Cosman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>65</sup> For an overview of diverse approaches to the relationship between nationalism and religion, see Anthony D. Smith, “The ‘Sacred’ Dimension of Nationalism,” *Millennium* 29, no. 3 (December 1, 2000): 791–814, dx.doi.org/10.1177/03058298000290030301.

secularism that elevated the State into a pseudo-religious cult.<sup>66</sup> He has also provided an analysis of the way nationalisms elevate the nation-state into a sacred institution, mirroring religious devotion and practice.<sup>67</sup> Most recently, he has described Nationalism as a form of idolatry, in which devotion is directed towards the wrong end and treats the political community as an end in itself.<sup>68</sup> The argument I propose does not undermine his claims, but rather suggests an intrinsic explanation as to why temporal powers, isolated into their own independent plane, seem to inevitably unite in themselves the temporal and spiritual to become an idol.

## CONCLUSION

A proper understanding of “pure human nature” reveals that human nature is open to goods beyond what its powers can attain. If this reality is not properly situated within a singular chain of human ends which relegates temporal ends to intermediate status, it will create a situation in which the temporal must claim to satisfy even supernatural desires.

This analysis suggests that there is a proper role for temporal powers and authentically natural ends. Maritain is correct to name the ways in which civil powers can foster the attainment of true human ends. However, by making so stark a separation between the temporal and spiritual planes and granting temporal powers ultimate ends, Maritain creates a teleological crisis in which the State, to secure its intelligibility and resolve its intrinsic instability, must accrue to itself the myths and grammar which signify it as an ultimate good. Cavanaugh sought to resolve this intrinsic instability by transforming all human ends into supernatural ends. However, by recognizing that human nature is itself open to supernatural fulfillment we can begin to construct a properly Christian understanding of civil society allowing for real natural ends. Such an understanding necessarily introduces limits into the purview and authority of the State, but does so in order

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<sup>66</sup> Cavanaugh describes the transformation of the State into the nation-state in the nineteenth century, which was only possible because of the increased influence temporal powers accrued over citizens’ identity. State-sponsored education, standardized language, and national identity united disparate peoples and inculcated a common vision and common original mythos of the nation and claimed a citizen’s highest allegiance and deepest identity. See William T. Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 12–24, 34–37.

<sup>67</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 57–122.

<sup>68</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, “The Splendid Idolatry of Nationalism,” *Pro Publico Bono—Magyar Kozigazgatas*, no. 2 (2021): 20, doi.org/10.32575/ppb.2021.2.1.

to keep an institution from swimming in waters in which it should not find itself in the first place. The result is not a further subjection of temporal powers to the supernatural, but merely the necessary recognition that the temporal is ordered to intermediate ends, that there are higher ends, and that the State lacks the power to attain those ends. Furthermore, it maintains this limitation by properly placing temporal ends within the single chain of ends Thomas Aquinas grounds in human teleology. Such an approach points to a resolution of the teleological crisis and provides a foundation for a humble yet effective State buffered against the threat of idolatry. **M**

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