



THE EASY ESSAYS OF PETER MAURIN

From the Editors

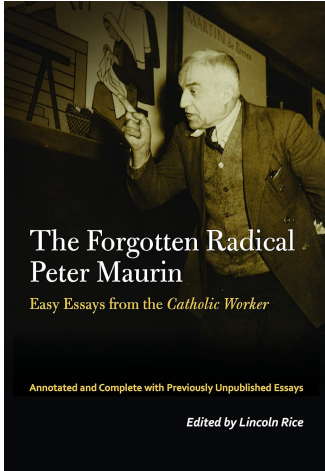
In our previous issue, you may have noticed a concise little piece of writing by Peter Maurin, co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement back in the 1930s. Provocatively entitled, “Why Not Be a Beggar?”, Maurin called this unique genre of writing, “Easy Essay.” Part poetry, part syllogistic argument, Maurin’s Easy Essays provoked thought on all sorts of matters pertaining to Catholic Social Teaching.

But don’t let the description, “Easy,” fool you. Maurin’s essays, though short and humorous, were the distillation of a wide range of philosophical, theological, and literary reading that few intellectuals of his time could match. Uniquely, though, he filtered such studies through his formation as a French, peasant-class, manual laborer, along with his lifelong participation in the daily liturgies of the Catholic Church.

In uncanny fashion, Maurin’s Easy Essays cut straight to the heart of a matter, offering premises any ordinary person on the street could accept, while then quickly building towards conclusions that, while often politically radical, suddenly seemed

commonsensical. Much like the way icons serve as contemplative windows into eternity, Maurin’s Easy Essays function like portals into another world, or as he might say, “a society in which it was easier to be good.” In his book, *The Forgotten Radical Peter Maurin*, Lincoln Rice states, “At first glance, Maurin’s Easy Essays appear overly simplistic and preposterous. Further investigation reveals complexity and nuance. The essays are packed with demanding ideas meant to convey dense information and encourage the listener to ponder different ways to understand and interact with reality. Jesus preached parables; Peter Maurin recited Easy Essays.”

We highly recommend Rice’s book as it contains a collection of all of Maurin’s Easy Essays in one volume, many of which we will continue to offer in this publication. For this issue, however, we have included an Easy Essay written just this year, in the spirit of Peter Maurin, by our dear friend and contributor Malcolm Schluenderfritz. Enjoy ruminating on such writing, for you may see in it a window into another world.+



SECULAR INSTITUTIONS

An Easy Essay by Malcolm Schluenderfritz

Our society is full of institutions
Because institutions seem more efficient
Than personal action.

Institutions do not see persons;
They see averages.

But no person
Is an average.

And because of this,
Many people
Are made unhappy by institutions.

Progressives try to make people happy
By changing the institutions.

But in an institution
Making a few people happy
Often makes many people unhappy
And makes the institution
Less efficient.

Conservatives try to protect the institutions
By removing the people
Who don't fit the average.

But this means that those
Who need help the most
Can't get it from institutions.

And those in the institutions
Can forget
About those who don't fit in.

Populists try to destroy the institutions
In the name of freeing the people.

But they forget
That people in a society full of institutions
Have lost the ability
To thrive without them.

And in a society
That has been atomized by institutions
Only the few
Will benefit by their removal.

Christians know
That we can't love averages
But rather persons.

And so we Christians
Should not focus on reforming institutions,
Or protecting or destroying them.

Rather, our actions
Should gradually make them unnecessary,
By replacing the impersonal institutions
With personal love.+

Malcolm Schluenderfritz began the website and podcast Happy Are You Poor. He lives with his family in Littleton, Colorado.

INTRODUCING BYUNG-CHUL HAN

Dr. Mark K. Spencer

Those of us striving to live a more fully Catholic, community-oriented, and human life face many challenges. One is that we often lack words that clearly describe the problems we face and the solutions for which we long. Another is that we often lack good models of people today who have managed to detach themselves from our dehumanizing culture, while adhering more closely to God, reality, and other persons.

One writer who helps overcome both of these challenges is the contemporary Catholic philosopher, Byung-Chul Han. I will present some of the main themes of his writing and his way of life here, but I do so only in the hope that you will read some of his books and put his ideas into practice. I recommend starting with *The Burnout Society*, *Saving Beauty*, or *The disappearance of rituals*.

Han lives and writes in Berlin, Germany, though he is originally from South Korea, and he has religious roots in Catholicism and Buddhism. He has written more than twenty very short, very accessible books, which offer a powerful critique of our technology-centered society, and a solution based around contemplation, life in community, shared narratives, and liturgical rituals.

The basic problem that Han sees with our contemporary world has to do with how our way of living (and not just our thinking), has been so shaped by the technologies we use, that we have been blocked from reaching true fulfillment. Technologies like smartphones have led us to treat the world as entirely controllable and manipulable. The inventions that shape our interactions with the world make life too “smooth”: they lead us to think that our interactions with others, world, and self should be frictionless and

effortless—whereas flourishing requires difficulty and effort.

Even more problematically, social media and related technologies shape us to see ourselves as having identities that we need to *produce*. A few decades ago, it was primarily *bosses* at work who told us what we needed to produce, and we mostly needed to be wary of *governments* engaging in undue surveillance of our lives. But now, Han notes, we have been trained by Instagram and TikTok to force *ourselves* to produce our own identities, to display it to others, and to watch ourselves. What we used to fear from external powers has been entirely internalized. This constantly felt need to produce my own identity has led, Han thinks, to the anxiety, exhaustion, and burnout so prevalent in our times.

In many of his books, Han contrasts *digital* technologies to *analog* ones. Digital technologies—computers, phones, streaming services, and so on—treat things as if they were nothing but manipulable, rearrangeable bits of information. We then come to see our own id-entities, our bodies, our communities, even our religion in much the same way. Analog things—normal material inventions, like non-electronic tools, the kinds used in all pre-internet crafts—are not so manipulable. When I use a tool of that sort, I must discover its meaning and conform myself to it. It grounds me in the real, physical, interpersonal world.

Traditional stories and rituals are similar, and along with analog tools, our

information age trains us to disdain them. Traditional narratives, like stories about Jesus or the saints, teach me who I am and what my place is in relation to others, the cosmos, and God; they give *meaning* to data. It’s through traditional liturgies and rituals, that we really internalize those stories. By contrast, digital narratives are ephemeral and entirely invented by their makers. The stories we post online are generally made to manipulate viewers into purchasing a product or adopting a view.

Another key contrast on which Han focuses is between *difficult beauty* and *pornography*. The beauty of other persons, nature, and religious art requires effort to appreciate it, and it often wounds us. But for all that, it is much more fulfilling, in large part because it requires me to take my attention off myself. Pornography, which effortlessly manipulates us into feeling pleasure, is, for Han, a fundamental symbol of what is wrong with our times. Just like in a pornographic film, social media makes us feel a compulsion to show too much of ourselves; it makes us think that our identity will be constructed through this exhibition.

True flourishing comes through exerting the effort of engaging with analog things, real people, narratives and rituals, not the ephemeral emptiness of digital information and pornography, where nothing is stable. Even more fundamental, flourishing requires contemplation. For Han, this includes the things the Catholic tradition has generally meant by “con-

templation”: includes leisure activities, telling stories together, engaging in festive rituals together.

But more fundamentally—and this is something Han thinks the Christian tradition can learn from Buddhism—contemplation is *inactivity*. We are freest to flourish as human beings when we exist in “silence, stillness, emptiness, and waiting—in a stance of receiving whatever happens as a gift.” When we just sit and do nothing, remaining attentive and open to what is around us, we escape the manipulations and compulsions foisted upon us by the information economy.

Han’s “solution” to our current predicament is to spend more time contemplating, especially in the sense of doing nothing. We should imitate the God-given natural world, where everything unfolds without anyone or anything trying to produce themselves or forge an identity for themselves. This contemplative “solution,” I think, is very helpful, because it is not yet another political or economic program; it’s not something that can be marketed and sold. Han seeks to help us return to a state of true community, where we can together be the contemplatives we were made to be. We do this not *in order to* accomplish something, or to *be all we can be*, but just for its own sake, because it is good and beautiful, as God saw when He first made the world.+

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THE HARROWING OF HADES: WHEN TO BE SUSPICIOUS OF SUSPICION

Tyler Hambley—Managing Editor

We often argue in these pieces for the renewal of thick, local, Catholic community. Generally, that involves criticism of the deleterious practices we're thrust into in our modern age. Sure enough, the isolating side effects of "smart" technology, social media, scarcity economics, and bureaucracy are easy to identify when juxtaposed with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, the shared material life of the early Church, and the simple faith of the saints. And so, perhaps you've come to a point of needing no more convincing: "Yes, let's undo the grip of our fragmented age and replace it with new practices centered on local community, conviviality, and contemplation."

But then, what does thick, local, community actually look like? Will there be house rules or rules of life? Who decides? How do we think about money and property together? What does hospitality to the poor look like? What if I'm a clean freak and you're a laid-back type—the two of us a veritable Mary and Martha? How do we honor our highly different personalities, personal histories, and particular sensibilities? Yet, what of *me* needs to transform, to grow (up?), or "knock it off"? What of *you*? These are questions that come hard and fast for any community attempting to, as Peter Maurin said, "Build a new society in the shell of the old."

Here, I want to talk about one pitfall we all run into on the way to building a more communitarian Church—namely, our wider culture's fondness for *suspicion*. This tendency stubbornly remains *within* each of us even as we attempt to cultivate the opposite virtue—*trust*. Many have identified Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche as the progenitors of this tendency to look just below the surface of things for something "rotting in Denmark." Indeed, these atheist "masters of suspicion" contributed many of the critical tools necessary to help even us

Christians reassess modern life. Today though, sound criticism often collapses into a culture of cynical "takes." For better or worse, we are all *children of suspicion* now.

And here lies a paradox: we bring the same skepticism we use to identify the isolating tendencies of modern life into our attempts to build new societies of trust and acknowledgment. You can imagine where things often go. What begins in goodwill, often descends into assigning ulterior intentions beneath what *others* say and do.

This shouldn't be too surprising. Sin (or the evil one) wants to keep us apart, holding one another at arm's length, projecting character flaws rather than opening conversation. And the trouble with imputing flaws is that such conjectures can be self-fulfilling. Far from harmless, our suspicions get mobilized through subtle and not-so-subtle expectations we form around our neighbor: "He's a screwup"; "She wants to avoid inconvenience"; "that kid's not ready for that." Once the social field gets so tilted, it can be an uphill challenge for someone to step *around* the very flaws into which we now expect (or just perceive) them to step.

But this is exactly why community is so necessary. Communities help us learn never to trust ourselves to know ourselves, or others, all alone. In fact, we need others to help us discover who we are and what *our own* intentions are as we move through life, for we are often not transparent even to ourselves. Only together do we receive who we are back from those we've committed ourselves to in trust. Only then can we learn that, say, we're a good leader, or that

our judgments in this case were born of jealousy, or that I tend to get sarcastic when I'm frustrated. We learn these things as we come to establish bonds of trust with others. And this is only something that we mutually build up over the long haul, requiring practices of forgiveness, charity, and common work. But none of it is easy!

And suspicion only makes things worse. Why do we play this role of Sherlock Holmes, "expertly" searching under the surface of others to build critical profiles? Part of the answer is that our world has trained us to think in competitive terms. It's as if the earth had a cataclysmic event and there was little time to escape on a single spaceship. Not all can go, so we must judge who belongs higher up on the boarding ladder. This exaggerates the point, but it fits the anxiety over tracking gains and losses we've all come to expect from work, school, parenting, attracting a mate, or gaining recognition from our peers. We are deathly afraid of being found "less than" others, of getting left behind.

We each, then, feel required to aim for competitive superiority. And there's no easier way to find ourselves superior than to keep scores. Our great conceit (often hidden even to ourselves) is that we spend our lives privately doling out merits and demerits. This shows up in all the seemingly innocuous comparative statements we make: "Oh, you're such a better parent than I am"; "Your house is so much cleaner than mine"; "Well, you're a lot more patient than I'd be." Such statements reveal the fact that sizing ourselves up to one another is one of our favorite interior activities.



THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON AND THE SCOURGE OF UTILITARIANISM

Fr. Daniel Griffith

The dignity of the human person can rightly be traced to the Catholic intellectual tradition and has long provided a firm foundation for human rights and the concept of human and collective flourishing. Along with the common good, the dignity of the human person is a meta-principle of Catholic social teaching (CST) and works along with the other CST principles to foster a more just and humane social order.

The dignity of the human person asserts that all human persons are made in the image and likeness of God and thus have an inherent and inviolable dignity which attends human nature. To transgress this dignity in action, law or policy is an offense against justice and the common good. Others have arrived at the truth of human dignity from a more secular and non-theistic foundation—for example, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* recognized human dignity as a foundation for the human rights expressed in the international charter.

Utilitarianism is a product of the Enlightenment and was born of the thought of the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham. Utilitarianism asserts that in social policy and law it is necessary in all cases to maximize pleasure and minimize pain—social utility is measured according to this principle. Many of the Enlightenment philosophers and scientists were people of good will who sought the betterment of society and human flourishing. However, their error, in my opinion, was in moving away from anthropological foundations and principles of natural law and Catholic moral thought. Utilitarian thought inevitably leads to a conclusion that desired ends justify any means to accomplish the goal, whether these means are morally licit or not.

Positivism was also a product of the Enlightenment and asserted that, in science and other academic disciplines, it is imperative to focus on what can be verifiable and provable. Thus, ethics, which cannot be verified and exists outside of the discipline of science and law, should have no bearing on how we examine the latter. Legal positivists believe that law is meritorious because the law giver promulgated it apart from any ethical considerations. Unfortunately, both utilitarianism and positivism have held sway on science, law, and policy since the Enlightenment and have shown themselves particularly influential and pernicious of late. Below, I list a number of examples of their modern influence and conclude with a call to Catholics and people of good will to embrace a more robust ethical foundation for the common good.

First, before the Catholic Church can rightly opine on the need for ethical foundations rooted in the dignity of the human person, it must acknowledge and confront its own deep failures regarding the clergy abuse epidemic and the treatment of survivor-victims. In a classic case of protecting the institution over adherence to the teachings of Christ and the protection and care of survivors, the Church perpetuated the "ends justify the means" trap—thus greatly harming many in the process and inhibiting its own moral voice. There is much need for reform and repair in this regard.

Second, the case of abortion is another example of utilitarianism run amok. There are legitimate concerns about women in poverty who often face, what Charlie Camosy describes as the "un-choice." Attention to human dignity requires societies that truly embrace human life to foster social conditions which allow the reception of life to be possible and desirable.

Still, there are too many places where abortion on demand is the result of utilitarian influences—the thing, even a life, must be eliminated to maximize utility and minimize inconvenience. Mother Teresa and Pope Francis have spoke out forcefully against this utilitarian bargain when it comes to the dignity of life in the womb. I was not surprised, then, that reversal of *Roe* resulted in backlash, as the last thing Americans will countenance is the inhibition of their "rights"—perceived or real.

Religious freedom is another example where utilitarianism and positivism ultimately corrode this fundamental right. The pandemic was a compelling example of this dynamic. Public health was a legitimate and pressing concern in the midst of a global pandemic, and is itself consistent with Catholic social teaching. However, far too often states were very ready to shutter church services while placing priority on commercial activity. In Minnesota, where I currently reside, it took the real threat of a lawsuit from the Minnesota and Lutheran bishops to get the Walz' administration to back off and reconsider its proposed policy.

Fourth, the approach of some political leaders to migration also expresses utilitarian tendencies. There is no doubt that American immigration policy is a mess and has been untenable for years. There has been a privation of political will toward common sense and comprehensive immigration reform for decades. The harm of this privation is evident to many. Concerns about security and the regulation of our borders are legitimate. However, some believe that any and all means necessary to secure our borders are legitimate. This is wrong. Acceptance of inhumane policies results in the degradation of our society and our moral voice. Concern for human

The problem is that our scorecards will never be very accurate, for we are all masters of self-deception: our fears incentivize us to imagine the worst in others. And this social habit fits perfectly our age when we rub shoulders less and less. Modern life allows us to build a safe buffer—meeting for coffee or "talking" only on social media—that keep external interactions "positive," precisely because we don't have to deal with each other over time in close proximity. Such "relationships" afford us the distance we need to pad our side of the scorecard without challenge.

But what if we instead moved *toward* thicker community—starting a community garden, sharing property or childcare, or eating together regularly? Such proximity requires the kind of frank talk capable of converting our suspicions from privately-held accusations into mutually-secured clarifications. In order to "go on" together in such activities, we have to detach ourselves from our suspicions (and self-exultation in our own mind's eye). Instead, we must learn the art of gently laying down our suspicions at the feet of others for them to either consider, challenge, or critique us in return. And gaining a comfort with receiving criticism helps us detach from that deepest of fears controlling all our suspicions. For our competitive agitation—of being left behind or of being dragged down by others—has everything to do with the original lie from Satan that if we ate of the forbidden fruit we would become like God. But the lie was that we weren't *already* like God—created in his image. The lie produced a false sense of *lack* in us, an *original suspicion* of ourselves, of others, and of God. But our Lord does not leave us behind. Not even Hades holds him back. That's what life in him and one another is all about: there's room on-board for us all; we have nothing to fear!+

dignity requires us to accompany our migrant brothers and sisters with compassion and care.

Lastly, for years, character mattered in electing politicians and in the appointment of public officials to serve us. These days, and no doubt influenced by utilitarian thought, the only question to be answered is who can get the job done to maximize our utility. If you think I am choosing sides, there are plenty of examples on both sides of the aisle that prove the point. Jimmy Carter was not a good president by all objective standards but he was a good, honest, and Godly man. Is it too much to wish for leaders who are ethical, competent, and inspiring?

Catholics have often played an outsized role in the selection of our leaders in the United States—the data backs this up. This is true, in part, because we are not tied to either party or ideology and thus free to move according to desired goals. My hope, in the coming months and years, is that the desired goals and choices of Catholics will be more influenced by the dignity of the human person and the common good than the scourge of utilitarianism. In this way, we can serve as a light and leaven in a society which values the gift of freedom consistent with human dignity.+

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