

“There Are No Sinners In Hell!” : Moral Judgments and Love in the Philosophy of Jacques Maritain

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Introduction

Within the realm of ordinary discourse, we might understand a “sinner” to be one who commits a “sin,” an action which violates God’s law. Such disobedience, one might say, is rightly punishable. Since, in its ultimate expression, “Hell” is that eternal punishment which is a justified consequence of one’s evil action, it is reasonable to conclude that there must be sinners in Hell. Moreover, it seems appropriate to proclaim this conclusion as the necessarily Christian position as well. Surely, our non-professional, non-philosophical, ordinary experience (and even some of our professional, philosophical ones) give ample testimony to the common, widespread acceptance of just such a position.

On this reckoning, then, the title of this essay may appear curious indeed. How is it possible, for an essay which concerns the philosophy of one of the twentieth-century’s foremost Christian thinkers to have such a seemingly heretical and possibly scandalous title?

My response to that question, as a justification of the title’s legitimacy, will consist of: a) an examination of the different types of moral judgments that function in moral experience; b) an exploration of Maritain’s thinking about the role and influence that love plays in these various types of moral judgments and in our relationship with God; and c) a statement about the criteria that Maritain establishes

for the determination of true moral culpability. My conclusion will show that, far from being a scandalous title and claim, the statement "There Are No Sinners In Hell," when understood correctly, is not only consistent with Maritain's ideas about morality, God, and the human person, it is actually a true and necessary conclusion as well.

Moral Judgments and Love

Moral judgments are essentially of two kinds: those in the *objective order*, which pertain to judgments about actions, and those in the *subjective order*, which concern judgments about the culpability or blameworthiness of persons. In either of these orders, we find that judgments may be either theoretical or concrete. Examples in the objective order might be theoretical: "Is stealing morally wrong?" and concrete: "Is it wrong for me to steal at this moment and in this situation?" To the theoretical belong abstract intellectual questions, while the concrete concerns the various unique circumstances attendant to the moral event, here and now. As philosophers we ask theoretical questions in both the objective and subjective orders; as ordinary human persons we often wrestle with the ambiguity and obscurity that comes from the necessity of making moral judgments of both kinds in concrete circumstances, when certainty and assurance may well be lacking. Although moral maturity and integrity may be understood as the integration of our professional, philosophical speculation with our concrete, personal choices and decisions, experience all-too-frequently provides us with sufficient testimony of the disparity between what we know we ought to do, on the one hand, and what we actually do, on the other. And while there are certainly many factors involved in both kinds of moral decision-making, love is principal among them. Thus, the question arises: in the philosophy of Jacques Maritain what part does love play in these two kinds of moral judgments, each considered both concretely and theoretically?

In his essay "Love in the Thought of Jacques Maritain,"¹ William Rossner, S.J., follows Maritain by first distinguishing between "natural" and "supernatural" loves and, secondly, by identifying two kinds

¹William L. Rossner, S.J., "Love in the Thought of Jacques Maritain," in *Jacques Maritain: The Man and His Achievement*, ed. Joseph W. Evans (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), pp. 237-258.

of natural love. The first kind of natural love, "Love-of-Nature," concerns the love that all beings, both animate and inanimate, have for God. This metaphysical use of the word "love" is *not* what we commonly understand by this word; rather it refers to the amplitude of metaphysical being by which any natural existent, in its inner dynamism, is ordered toward "the good and the end to which it tends by the very necessity of its nature."² Maritain tells us that this type of love is true for "birds, moss, or inanimate molecules."³ Although characteristic of all natural, created beings, it takes on special significance when predicated of human persons, endowed as we are with intellectual appetites. Even though Rossner actually discusses four different types or manifestations of this "love-of-nature," the central point for us *as persons* is that, just as the senses naturally love something that is pleasing to them, so the will naturally inclines toward any good whatsoever. This natural desire of the will ultimately seeks and delights only in God . . . even if the Divine is not explicitly known or understood as the object of this natural desire or love of our human nature.⁴

While this "love-of-nature," when specifically considered in relation to persons, concerns the metaphysical structure of the biologically affective as well as the intellectually affective dimension of human nature, it does not, of itself, establish the moral or genuinely human life of a person. For that we must consider the role and operation or willed-exercise of our intellectual appetite. This is what Rossner identifies, again following Maritain's terminology, as a "love-of-free-option." This now is love as it is more properly defined and understood: a freely chosen and willed-commitment to an intellectually apprehended good.

Although God is the Absolute Transcendent Good and the ultimate object of the will's desire, we do not see God's essence (which would *necessarily* determine the will's love if we did). In lived-experience we encounter many rival goods of many conflicting kinds, and as a result, we are left to contend with a conflict in our affections. When we look

²*Ibid.*, p. 247.

³Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1948), p. 42.

⁴William L. Rossner, S.J. "Love in the Thought of Jacques Maritain" in *Jacques Maritain: The Man and his Achievement*, ed. Joseph W. Evans (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), pp. 247-51.

to go beyond this experienced-confusion and choose to *orient* our lives to God as a desire on our part for the supreme good, we are casting ourselves “into the darkness of the Incomprehensible.” Ultimately, at this foundational level, the will either gives itself to the good, to God, or it does not. This primal *character-orientation decision* cannot be avoided. And while it does not perfect us from error, wrong-doing, or sin, “the will, nevertheless, in choosing any moral good out of love for goodness, *de facto* extends its love to the True Good. . . .”⁵ to God, even if God is not known as such.

This systematic delineation of the various types of love takes us into the heart of understanding the role of love in the various kinds of moral judgments. In his 1949 Princeton lectures, published as *An Introduction To the Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy*,⁶ Maritain says that there are two sorts of inclination that operate in moral decision-making. The first of these concerns the laws of our more properly “animal” nature; these are the forces of instinct and heredity, and they are rooted profoundly in our biological nature. Distinguished from these lower influences, however, are those inclinations of our more properly “human” nature, that is, those which issue from our spiritual dimension: from the intellect and from the intellectual appetite (what Maritain also calls “connaturality”). These “higher” inclinations presuppose all the forces and complexities of our lower nature but, as is so characteristic of Maritain’s thinking in regard to the many forms of practical knowledge, they are “passed through the lake of Intellect (functioning unconsciously).”⁷ All of these influences and forces occur at a pre-philosophical or pre-conscious level, though they are purified and informed by the individual person’s love-of-nature which *orients his or her basic character*.⁸

Maritain also points out that in the concrete order, where confusion and difficulty abound, each of these types of inclination can be perverted. Moreover, these two types of inclination, operating as they do below the level of conscious self-reflection and self-understanding, are frequently in conflict, or they are so intermingled with each other

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 253.

⁶Jacques Maritain, *An Introduction To The Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy* (Albany, New York: Magi Books, 1990).

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 50–59.

that it is not uncommon that “the natural tendencies and inclinations born of reason may be overcome or warped by the other instincts.”⁹

Thus, in all the darkness that may come from the absence of objective certitude in concrete moral decisions, or from the confusion or conflict that we often introspectively experience, in the final analysis we are called to consult and act upon, in truth of conscience, that orientation of our being toward the Universal Good or God. This is what Rossner identified as the human version of love-of-nature, which underlies any and all of our acts of free-option or free choice. For as Maritain himself says, all the rules and objective norms of morality can neither be applied nor applied well “unless they are embodied in the ends which actually attract my desire and . . . will.”¹⁰ As a person is, so will the ends appear. For if we do not recognize the relationship between those moral laws or values which rule our lives and the ends upon which we make our life depend, we may not succeed in choosing what our inmost being desires, the Good.¹¹

These insights introduce us to a consideration of the tension between the moral value of external acts and the moral value of “intention” or the internal acts of the will. In this way Maritain establishes the criteria for true moral culpability.

True Moral Culpability

After acknowledging that culpability (or “fault” as he calls it) is not easy to explain, Maritain identifies four factors that are involved in the determination of moral blameworthiness.¹² The first element refers to the act or action itself; it is the external act which may be determined as evil if it fails to conform with the principles of right reason. “Here,” Maritain tells us, “the object alone is considered, in itself, not taking into account the intentions or the will of the subject.”¹³ While this objective immoral act is important, the commission of it is alone not sufficient for a conclusion of moral culpability.

The second element which Maritain explores is the role and activity of the will in the evil or immoral act. The realization of the absolutely

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 62.

¹⁰Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, p. 52.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹²Jacques Maritain, *Moral Philosophy*, pp. 188–97.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 188.

essential part played by the will has been slow to develop over the course of the history of moral consciousness he tells us, and, we might add, is also slow to appear in those whose own understanding of morality is likewise limited and immature. As we consider the act of the will, we also need to consider both the intentions and the circumstances that are involved, concretely, in each individual case, bearing in mind that no two cases are ever the same.¹⁴

Maritain points out that it is possible for an innocent person to commit an evil action in the objective order with no evil or malice intent; confoundingly, he also points out that it is equally possible to have malicious intent which commits an innocent act. In the former case, the action may occur out of ignorance or through what Maritain calls an “invincibly erroneous conscience.” In neither of those cases of interior innocence is moral fault to be attributed. For example, Maritain writes that “for many poor urchins in certain big cities, stealing is not a sin, it’s a sport. They are so invincibly convinced of this that there is no moral fault in their thefts.”¹⁵

Those of evil intention, even if their actions be innocent or morally appropriate or acceptable in their own right, are not dealt with in so kindly a fashion. For in their “malicious innocence there is no innocence at all, but rather diabolical malice.”¹⁶

“Invincible error” is not always sufficient to mitigate or exonerate moral responsibility, however; in some cases, the moral agent must bear responsibility for an insufficiently informed conscience. There are many factors which Maritain identifies in this context, and they serve to increase or decrease the degree of personal responsibility. These factors include violence of the passions; “tricks of the Unconscious”; mental imbalance; obsessions; compulsions, addictions, hereditary predispositions; hormonal imbalance; and other psychological dynamics which may be involved in the determination of fault. The entire range of these subjective internal psychic energies constitute what Maritain identifies as the third element in the determination of fault.

In her article “Aquinas’s Assent/Consent Distinction and the Problem of ‘*Akrasia*,’” Judith Barad provides an additional consideration to this discussion of moral fault.

¹⁴Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, p. 51.

¹⁵Jacques Maritain, *Moral Philosophy*, p. 192.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 192.

The problem of *akrasia* [moral weakness] is that we are aware that we judge certain actions (primarily those involving the bodily enjoyments) to be morally bad and not to be done, and yet go against that judgment by performing the actions."¹⁷

A Socratic interpretation would place the emphasis on a failure of insight or a lack of knowledge and truth. By contrast, Barad argues that the intellect may terminate in an assent to a proposition involving a commitment to a universal good or principle without the will's consequent choice (in a particular case) to act upon that knowledge. We may know that something is truly wrong and yet do it anyway. Barad points to Aquinas in recognizing that two acts of will are therefore necessary in order to execute a genuinely moral action involving personal responsibility. First, we must understand the good and will it in a general way. This is *assent*. Secondly, however, "a more intense act of will is required to make this principle the one we will act on in a given situation. If this will-act does not occur [*consent*], a likely result will be 'weakness of will,' for propositional assent is not sufficient to guarantee action."¹⁸

This moral weakness may constitute the vast majority of what ordinary folks may understand by the term "sin," which in turn helps us to understand how we may genuinely love the good and yet may occasionally fail to do it. This is, I think, precisely what Maritain had in mind when he wrote:

Yet, in order that a man follow [the objective norms of morality], at the moment of temptation they must not merely resound in his head as mere universal rules which suffice to condemn him though not to set him in motion. [Otherwise] . . . he will not do the good he loves . . . , but he will do the evil he does not wish to do.¹⁹

Sin on this account issues from weakness, not from any malice or willed-intention of evil; instead it is the sin of those who yet love the Universal Good or God but who, at this juncture in their life's journey, may lack the sufficient strength or virtue they ultimately need in order to eventually succeed at doing the good which they also love.

¹⁷Judith Barad, "Aquinas's Assent/Consent Distinction and the Problem of *Akrasia*," *The New Scholasticism*, LXII, Winter 1988, p. 98.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 110.

¹⁹Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, p. 53.

To return now to Maritain's account of the elements of moral fault, I will discuss the fourth factor, which brings us to our conclusion. After observing that sin is always *against* something, Maritain identifies the three categories against which sin may be directed:

- a) sin against the universe of society;
- b) sin against the universe of being or creation; and
- c) sin against the transcendent Whole or God.²⁰

Different "sins" may vary in their degree of seriousness when considered from the perspective of these different categories; some may be severe in one category but of little significance in another. Maritain observes that for us in the Judeo-Christian tradition, seriousness of fault or sin lies chiefly in its being an offense against God, the Alpha and Omega of all goodness. But if God is pure act, self-subsisting Goodness, and absolutely immutable, what sense does it make to refer to sin as an "offense against God?"

Maritain's response is simple. "Sin is something which God *does not desire* and desires not to be."²¹ When I sin my good and the good of all creation which God desires and loves will now be prevented from coming into being. Maritain concludes by saying that:

Moral fault affects the Uncreated, in no way in Himself, since He is absolutel invulnerable, but in the things and the effects He desires and loves. Here, one can say that God is the most vulnerable of beings. No need for poisoned arrows, cannons and machine guns—an invisible movement *in the heart of a free agent* is all that is needed to wound Him, to deprive His antecedent will of something here below which it desired and loved from all eternity, and which shall never be.²² (underscore mine)

Conclusion

When we reflect back over the various types of moral judgments which we distinguished at the outset, we can now appreciate Maritain's insights of concerning the part that love plays in each of them. Several conclusions stand out.

²⁰Jacques Maritain, *Moral Philosophy*, p. 194.

²¹*Ibid.*, pp. 196–97.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 197.

I. *In the objective order of judgments about actions:*

A. *Conclusion #1 (as applied to theoretical judgments).* Philosophical analysis can successfully enable us to establish moral rules that are in keeping with the loving nature of God, of the created universe, of the human person, and of the precepts of right reason. In this category love plays an admittedly minor and less active role.

B. *Conclusion #2 (as applied to concrete judgments).* Moral judgments about actions which occur in concrete situations proceed from the mysterious inwardness of an individual's Self, the fabric of which involves and may include the secret depths of one's being, the spiritual orientation of one's loves, and the whole complex interrelation of biology, psychology, intellect, will, and Divine Grace. When making these concrete decisions we ought to be a) guided by an intellectual commitment to ethical principles; b) strengthened by moral virtues (which are always in need of additional improvement); c) animated by a love for the Good in all things, all the while that we are d) conscious of the epistemological limitation and darkness in which we often must proceed; and e) mindful of, and humbled by, our intellectual and moral weaknesses and vices.

II. *In the subjective order of judgments about persons:*

A. *Conclusion #3 (as applied to theoretical judgments).* Understanding the complexity of human nature, we can also understand, in a universe created by a loving God whom all of that creation loves in return, that the determination of fault or moral culpability involves many complex factors. In the final analysis, love (God's and our own) is salvific; wickedness and malice are those serious obstacles to an interior life of love which wills the good. Thus, while moral damnation is certainly possible, *it is not reducible to the commission of an external action alone.*

B. *Conclusion #4 (as applied to concrete judgments)* Humanly-made moral judgments which attempt to assign interior moral fault or culpability, whether to others or ourselves, are ultimately an impossibility. We may judge the sin but never the sinner; we may judge material or legal liability or responsibility but not *moral* guilt. For judgments of the latter are made by God alone, Who understands the deepest recesses of the heart. Maritain says: "It is said of the church

that ‘she does not judge of interior dispositions;’ this applies all the more to human society. It cannot undertake to mimic God’s justice.”²³ Nor can we mimic God’s justice individually. We can understand how complex it is to determine moral fault, and we can speculate on and hope for Divine mercy; but we simply do not know what God’s justice, mercy, and love are in themselves; nor do we understand how they might work.

Thus, love brings us into being; it permeates our nature, and it calls us to grow in our own capacity as loving persons and stewards of God’s creation. We can understand that love of universal goodness makes us better, makes our world better, and makes our choices and moral judgments better: objectively, to proceed toward the Truth, and subjectively, to proceed with compassion in our vast network of relationships. Moral weakness has no ultimate strangle-hold upon us. We are comforted by the words of St. John of the Cross: “In the hour of our lives, we will be judged on how we have loved.”

In this way too we can understand Maritain’s entry in his *Notebooks* on the 29th of March, 1910 (Easter Tuesday), when he wrote: “Leon Bloy comes to see us. ‘There are no sinners in Hell,’ he tells us, ‘for sinners were the friends of Jesus. There are only the *wicked*.’”²⁴

²³*Ibid.*, pp. 193–94.

²⁴Jacques Maritain, *Notebooks*, (Albany, New York: Magi Books, 1984), p. 62.