

EVIL IN MARITAIN AND LONERGAN THE EMERGING PROBABILITY OF A SYNTHESIS

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The most recalcitrant and recurring of human problems is that of evil. This paper attempts a synthesis of two prominent Thomists in their tackling of this vexing question. The main themes relate: (1) Maritain's inverted intuition with Lonergan's inverse insights; (2) Maritain's detailed and diagrammed analysis of the part of God and creature in the act of choice to do evil with Lonergan's notion of basic sin; (3) the directive power of Maritain's initial intuition of being, with Lonergan's transcendental precepts; (4) the Name of God referring to either the first cause or the ultimate solution.

That further work is needed is indicated by Maritain's *non-inclusion* of Rachel¹ mourning her children and Jacob wrestling with the angel--emblems for existential situations which do not easily lend themselves to philosophy as such--as in distinguishing between "the *sapiential* mien" and "the *imprecatory* mien,"² and by Lonergan's appeal that one set aside the logical principle of excluded middle when evil is discussed.³ Since Rachel and Jacob are beings, their exclusion seems improper to a philosophy which begins with the intuition of being and develops through essence and *esse*. And if "Be reasonable" is a transcendental precept⁴ governing a person's internal processes, it seems improper to allow a single violation at the single most vexing question a person brings to philosophy. That the work of again examining evil might be successful is a hope expressed by Lonergan: "Evil is, not a mere fact, but a problem, only if one attempts to reconcile it with the goodness of God, and if God is good, then there is not only a problem of evil, but also a solution."⁵

Maritain begins philosophizing with an intuition into being; within being the first distinction is between that which is, or essence, and the act of existing. The act of existing is properly known only in the judgment, but by careful use of analogy it can be conceptualized and take its place in discourse. This distinction appears throughout the range of being as we directly know it, that is of ourselves and all other created beings. In God, essence is identical with the act of existing; God is good, and creates all

things, including free creatures, who, while depending on God for their being, can in a way introduce a nihilation into being. This nihilation is moral evil. Physical evil is part of the structure of things; the divine action causes it *per accidens*. That is, granted that the being of carnivores is good, they need to eat; being eaten will appear evil to the prey.⁶

Lonergan takes as primary datum the understanding of what it is to understand.⁷ Intelligibility is "immanent in world process. Emergent probability is the successive realization of the possibilities of concrete situations in accord with their probabilities."⁸ This theme pervades all world order.⁹ Physical evil is simply the result of the fact that the unordered manifold is prior to the more highly ordered and developed. There are false starts and breakdowns. Moral evil is described as what could and ought to be, but is not.¹⁰

Both Lonergan and Maritain share the Thomistic tradition, appeal to a world view influenced by faith in God revealing, and use the language of essence, existence, matter, form, act, potency, and substance. There is no great difficulty in understanding either from the point of view of the other. Since synthesis is derived from understanding, it might be inferred to be relatively easy, once ambiguities focusing on possibility-potency are specified. I do not intend to do this here. The greater difficulty in synthesis occurs because of the way evil is discussed. If the discussion of evil cannot be understood, it cannot be part of a synthesis.

Synthesis is important because dialogue within the human community is important. Synthesis is not a marshaling of concepts but derives from understanding. Mutual understanding will occur when contradictions are exposed and resolved, and when the distinctions are made which result in unity.¹¹ Importance "attaches to the probabilities of the occurrence of insight, communication, agreement, decision."¹²

My thesis then is quite simple: I do nothing much more than suggest a stop to further analysis at the point of explaining moral evil. The stop is required by allegiance to Maritain's intuition of being as the beginning of philosophy, and to Lonergan's "Be reasonable" as a transcendental precept. I delineate two areas where understanding, and therefore synthesis, is impossible in Maritain, and one area in Lonergan. My suggestion is that the analysis and the direction they take on this question simply stop lest, in Lonergan's terms, the counter-positions prevail.

Just as evil appears at the very beginning of the accounts of creation which we have inherited, so too the distress its analysis causes to a philosophic system attacks the very beginning. In Maritain it is intuition which suffers; in Lonergan it is insight. The bulb from which all else grows is inverted. In *God and the Permission of Evil* Maritain intends to elaborate on the positions of *Existence and the Existent*. In order to understand the role of the creature in introducing evil into the world an inverted intuition is necessary. "Now the paths of non-being--once one has, by a kind of

inverted intuition, become conscious of it and of its formidable role in reality--are as difficult as those of being."¹³ Almost the same phrasing is used by Lonergan as he accounts for human ignorance, malice, and lack of control. "Then to understand his concrete situation, man has to invoke not only the direct insights that grasp intelligibility but also the inverse insights that acknowledge the absence of intelligibility."¹⁴

The characteristic feature of moral evil, of sin, is that it is a privation. Privation differs from simple non-being in that it is a form of non-being which in some way ought to be. It is a lack of what is due. For Maritain, to sin is to act while the will is not adhering to the rule of reason or divine law. Were there no act, there would be no moral evil. This doctrine is derived from Aquinas: "Now the fact of not applying the rule of reason or of the Divine law, has not in itself the nature of evil, whether of punishment or of guilt, before it is applied to the act."¹⁵ In a passage from *De Malo* which is more suggestive of the approach Lonergan was to take, Aquinas asserts that error is regarded as sinful insofar as it is not only simple ignorance, but acting while ignorant.¹⁶ The key to sin in Lonergan is to act without reflecting: "The reign of sin...is the priority of living to learning how to live...." On each occasion, man "could reflect and through reflection avoid sinning; but he cannot bear the burden of perpetual reflection; and long before that burden has mounted to the limit of physical impossibility, he chooses the easy way out."¹⁷ Basic sin is a "contraction of consciousness," not an event, not something that occurs; is a failure of occurrence, the absence in the will of a reasonable response to an obligatory motive. Hence it cannot have a cause, and God cannot be its cause.¹⁸

Nowhere in metaphysics does the influence of faith seem to condition the philosopher's discourse more than in this question of evil. Whereas evil confronts us daily, the notion that God is good, in fact, anything concerning God, is the last thing known by mere philosophy. Nevertheless, since faith has identified God as good, as being, as creator, the faith-filled philosopher can in no way allow God to be cause of sin, a moral evil which consists in aversion from God by a creature.

Lonergan's approach to the problem is to allow an exception to his transcendental precepts. In this case it is the precept to be reasonable as exemplified by the principle of excluded middle. When it is first posited the principle has no exception: "terms of possible meaning are subject to the principle of excluded middle as long as the terms are regarded as acceptable; for if one is to employ the terms, one has no third alternative to affirming or denying them."¹⁹ But later there are special rules necessitated by the irrationality of basic sin:

For the familiar disjunction of the principle of excluded middle (Either A or not A) must be replaced by a trichotomy. Besides what is positively and what simply is

not, there is the irrational constituted by what could and ought to be but is not. Besides the being that God causes, and the non-being that God does not cause, there is the irrational that God neither causes nor does not cause but permits others to perpetrate. Besides the actual good that God wills and the unrealized good that God does not will, there are the basic sins that he neither wills nor does not will but forbids.²⁰

In contradiction to this approach, it should be remembered that God is one and simple and there cannot be several wills, nor a split will, nor consequent and permissive decrees. Forbid and permit are each an act of will. Either the unity of God or the permit/forbid type analysis needs to be eschewed.

To the extent that synthesis is a result of understanding it will not come about as long as a firmly established transcendental precept can be violated at the one point where the experiencing human most needs the consolations of philosophy. Problems of method, and of physics and math, were not solved by violating the principle--why should the single problem of evil be so solved? This cannot be understood.

There is a second barrier to understanding. Neither Maritain nor Lonergan is providing a direct insight or intuition into either evil or God. Rather each is elaborating an ideal explanation, submitting hypotheses to the community as it were. Both are elaborating mental constructs.

And you see also what we must think of the *moments of reason* which we introduce into the establishment of the eternal plan when we try to picture it to ourselves in our fashion. All these moments of reason are absolutely nothing in God and in the establishment of the divine plan. They are mere beings of reasoning reason, which have foundation only in our manner of conceiving when we wish to picture to ourselves in terms of time that which, dependent on the divine eternity, is of itself exclusive of time.²¹

Maritain admits that this is anthropomorphic thinking and sets its limits. All of it "has no reality in God and in the eternal Instant of God; it is a world of clouds which is swept away as soon as we pass to the reality of the eternal Sun and of the divine purposes...."²²

Lonergan characterizes the probable as the ideal;²³ the essence of probability is that it sets an ideal norm from which actual frequencies can diverge but not systematically.²⁴ To translate into terms relevant to the present discussion: a synthesis of the philosophies of Aquinas, Maritain,

Lonergan, and ourselves is ideally more probable to the extent that my critique and our disagreements are not systematic. Should we systematically, and with mutual understanding, accept some of what they say and then take a different direction on the question of evil, that different direction would be more probable.

Maritain calls the activity of devising explanations which are not direct insights or intuitions into being, logical watch-making.²⁵ And so it is. What is achieved is an "auxiliary entity of reason" which enables us to know the lack of being that is evil, which "is in nowise a being of reason; it is indeed very real in things."²⁶

There is a third barrier to understanding. A philosophy which begins with the intuition of being cannot leave out any being. Nor can it philosophically appeal to an order outside of being for a solution, as in Maritain's quite authentic claim that "we do not save our souls in the posture of theoretical universality and detachment from self for the purpose of knowing."²⁷ However, that other order is either being, and so already part of the problem and its connections with other issues, or it is not being and thus not available within a philosophy of being. The tools of analogy, of the *via negativa*, may be suggestive pointers; they cannot be a shibboleth. Again, no understanding occurs. Maritain is certainly aware of the existential significance of the other way--Kierkegaard and the mystics are within his purview. Within a philosophy of being they cannot be considered as "other." Maritain is right, more-over, in asserting that the kind of inclusion within philosophy cannot be the embrace of an Hegelian-type reason. As so included they provide merely a theme for academic philosophy, thereby losing their existential significance.²⁸ From my point of view, it is more authentic for a person to adopt the *imprecatory* mien, leaving the *sapiential* mien aside, than it is for the philosopher, adopting the *sapiential* mien, to leave the praying person's experience and convictions aside. Beginning with being, the philosopher is to include everything. Beginning with existence as he confronts it, the prayerful person copes as best he can. To sharpen the point of view: it is one thing to say, "I can't handle this philosophically." It is quite another to say, "My philosophy includes all being as being, but this matter in hand is something other, being of another order, or something of an order other than nature." Or to say, as it were, "My principles range wherever reason operates, except when I reason about evil."

There are truths from a source higher than moral philosophy; but moral philosophy cannot be unaware of that beyond, because it is to have concrete and existential significance and is to be existential and genuinely practical. There is the regime of morality in contact with the First Cause via the intermediary of law, and there is the regime of supra-morality in contact with God as a friend in connivance with law, springing from a higher source, a trans-natural aspiration. And the fact remains that if moral

philosophy is really concerned with concrete human conduct and possesses the least existential and genuinely practical value, some men live under the regime of supra-morality, delivered from all servitude, even that of reason and moral law--not beyond the distinction of good and evil, but doing good without the will being curbed by the law.²⁹ In a parallel way, since morals depend on freedom, the analysis of the free act which deals with the moral and spiritual relations of created persons to one another and with God, presupposes the world of nature, but is quite distinct from it, "for the free act is not a part of this world, but of an original universe of its own, the universe of freedom"³⁰

There is an analogy advancing from the distinction between act and potency in every created being, from the distinction between essence and existence, towards the claim that they are really distinct in all but God, in whom essence is identical with existence. This advance is the *via negativa*. But there is nothing leading in such a way from creature to God as concerns antecedent and consequent permissive decrees, as concerns resistible and irresistible impulses. This is the place to stop, it would seem. As above, these moments of reason are absolutely nothing in God. Why need Maritain pursue the analysis, the logical watch-making, to the point where the one God now appears to have antecedent and consequent, resistible and irresistible, characteristics? Are these straw men, imaginary objections, to Maritain's Christian presuppositions? If they were real challenges, it could be said that neither do the objectors see into the essence of God to know whether God permits, or is resistible.

Similarly, in Lonergan: what leads to the positing of the trichotomy? In his own language he weakens the position needlessly, leaves the field open to the counter-position. Thus it would be more strategic to simply stop the construct of ideas. This is simply to expect Lonergan to adhere to his own directives concerning the principle of excluded middle: "with respect to each proposition, rational consciousness is presented with the three alternatives of affirmation, of negation, and of seeking a better understanding and so a more adequate formulation of the issue."³¹ The evidence is simply not all in on evil; no one sees, in essence, what God is doing in this area. Should the Christian think that faith needs justification by philosophy--evil, as described by Pope John Paul II, is the mystery before which all humans shudder. The analyses of Maritain and Lonergan are too complex, as either admits, to be commonly grasped. Further, they seem to be at variance with their own more significant principles. Thus they are outside the more probable line of emergence towards the understanding of all, by all.

Maritain's friend, Charles Journet, regarded God and evil as polar opposites, both mysterious.³² The oscillation which the mind makes between the two poles carries one forward; although there are partial insights and schemas of explanation, a final intuition or insight is yet to occur. Let the principle of excluded middle remain part of the

transcendental principle of "Be reasonable." And let the range of the philosophy of being include Rachel and her consolation; although she would not be consoled, when that consolation does come, it too will be being. Lonergan's transcendental precepts can carry the mind a long way; so also can Maritain's intuition into being, and his distinguishing in order to unite. These powerful elaborations are too important to abandon when confronted with evil. A synthesis were more highly probable were nothing yielded to violation of initial intuition for the sake of logical watch-making, nothing yielded to violation of the transcendental precept "Be reasonable" for the sake of all-inclusiveness.

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NOTES

1. J. Maritain, *Saint Thomas and the Problem of Evil* (Milwaukee, 1942) pp. 9-10.
2. J. Maritain, *Existence and the Existent*, transl. L. Galantiere and G. Phelan (New York, 1948) pp. 124-125.
3. B. Lonergan, *Insight* (San Francisco, 1978) pp. 667-668.
4. B. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Minneapolis, 1972) p. 53.
5. *Insight*, p. 694.
6. *Existence*, pp. 19-26.
7. *Insight*, p. xxviii.
8. *Insight*, p. 171.
9. *Insight*, p. 668.
10. *Insight*, pp. 666-667.
11. The sub-title of Maritain's *Degrees of Knowledge*.
12. *Insight*, p. 210.
13. J. Maritain, *God and the Permission of Evil*, transl. J. Evans (Milwaukee, 1966) p. 32. This explains and corrects *Existence and the Existent*.
14. *Insight*, p. 689.
15. *St. Thomas and the Problem of Evil*, pp. 40-41. This is Maritain's Latin note as translated by English Dominicans. *Summa Theologica* (New York, 1947) I-II, 75, 1, ad 3.
16. St. Thomas Aquinas, *De Malo* (Turin, 1953) III, 7, Resp. This is the author's translation.
17. *Insight*, p. 693.
18. *Insight*, pp. 666-667.
19. *Insight*, p. 576.
20. *Insight*, pp. 666-667.
21. *God and the Permission of Evil*, p. 91.
22. *God and the Permission of Evil*, p. 93.
23. *Insight*, p. 119.
24. *Insight*, p. 102.
25. *God and the Permission of Evil*, p. 84.
26. *God and the Permission of Evil*, pp. 11-12.
27. *Existence*, p. 125.
28. *Existence*, pp. 125-126.
29. J. Maritain, *Moral Philosophy* (New York, 1964) pp. 439-440.
30. *God and the Permission of Evil*, p. 10.
31. *Insight*, p. 381.
32. C. Jourmet, *The Meaning of Evil*, transl. M. Barry (New York, 1963) pp. 21-23.