

## CHRISTIAN MORALITY:

### A MORALITY OF THE DIVINE GOOD SUPREMELY LOVED ACCORDING TO JACQUES MARITAIN AND JOHN PAUL II

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This paper argues that Christian moral philosophy proposes a morality of the Divine Good supremely loved. Jacques Maritain takes this position in his historical and critical survey of the subject, published in English under the title *Moral Philosophy*, in 1964.<sup>1</sup> John Paul II defends a similar viewpoint in his encyclical letter *The Splendor of Truth*, which was issued in 1993.<sup>2</sup> The following brief analysis is intended to show the agreement between these two authors on the subject of Christian moral philosophy. The development of the authors' respective positions on this subject matter will be deferred to a later time.

Western philosophical thought began with Greek speculation concerning nature, being, and happiness. Moral philosophy in the West was given its first definitive shape by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Aristotle articulated a view of man as a being that seeks ends through the actualization of his powers, and in having a rational nature he determines himself in the pursuit of happiness. Human beings, who naturally seek fulfillment through rational choice, must therefore face the question of discovering their final end.

Maritain outlines Aristotle's position in regard to the end of man for two reasons. Aristotle offers a doctrine that Maritain finds to be both largely correct on its own merits in spite of some flaws, and it also serves as an historical point of departure for Christian moral philosophy. Since Aristotle does not employ specific religious teachings in his writings, he speaks in Maritain's estimate in a singular way for *human reason*, which leaves his doctrine religiously unencumbered, yet

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Moral Philosophy* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1964).

<sup>2</sup> John Paul II, *The Splendor of Truth* (Boston: St. Paul Books and Media, 1993).

remarkably apt for union with *faith* in the Christian solution to the end of man.

## Part One: Reason's Definition of the End of Man

### 1. Aristotle Identified the Good and Happiness

Aristotle taught that human nature has a natural tendency to seek happiness. Man thus seeks by nature to discover what good or goods, the possession of which, yields happiness. Maritain concludes that Aristotelian happiness (*eudaimonia*) consists in the perfect fulfillment of human nature.<sup>3</sup>

Aristotle found among the multiplicity of human goods both a hierarchy of goods and a supreme or sovereign good that exercises authority over subordinate goods.<sup>4</sup> Happiness consists of interior and exterior elements. Interior elements include wisdom, virtue, and pleasure, where contemplation is superior to action and life lived virtuously (owing to its fruition in good and beautiful actions) is superior to living for wealth, honor, or pleasure. Elements exterior to the soul include friendships and wealth.<sup>5</sup> Yet, happiness is more than its parts. The art of living rightly is the "art of ordering one's life in such a way as to attain the supreme end: happiness."<sup>6</sup>

### 2. Seeking Equilibrium Between The Choice of a Good Action and Happiness

In Maritain's interpretation, Aristotle's ethics faces a major difficulty. A contemplated choice must be measured by reason in two ways. On the one hand, reason must find a concrete and virtuous action (that, say, is a mean between two extremes). On the other hand, the contemplated concrete action must also be a means to the long-term goal of happiness. Reason measures one and the same moral action both as to how it attains the plenitude and beauty proper to a human

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<sup>3</sup> Maritain, *Moral Philosophy*, p. 31.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

action (that means it is good in and for itself) and as to how it serves as a means to happiness (that means it tends toward the ultimate end).<sup>7</sup> Maritain says that Aristotle gives primacy to the finality of life as a whole: “for Aristotle, what dominates the whole field of ethics and the way in which specific virtues are to be determined, is the consideration of the ultimate End, the primacy of the Supreme Good, or the happy life.”<sup>8</sup>

Yet, Maritain sees a problem:

All this amounts to saying that the equilibrium sought by Aristotle was not decisively attained. I fear, moreover, that a kind of vicious circle is implied in his procedure: the fact is that virtue appears herein as essentially a means toward the...blessed life; and yet virtue is also an integral part of that blessed life.... The means to the end (virtue) thus enters into the very notion and [constitution] of the end to which it is directed.<sup>9</sup>

The Aristotelian theory thus has a problem.

### 3. The End Has Two Faults

Aristotle’s happiness consists of several elements and is a complex whole that motivates reason’s entire grasp of the moral life. Yet, Maritain laments “Our whole moral life, all our effort and striving toward rightness and virtue are suspended from an end which, in fact, vanishes within our grasp.”<sup>10</sup> Although tailored to the aspirations of human nature, Aristotle’s sovereign good embraces so many ends and conditions that few can approach it.<sup>11</sup> Maritain concluded that Aristotle’s happiness is neither practically accessible nor practically constraining.

Another difficulty comes from the eudaimonist conception itself and from a failure to distinguish between the good and happiness, which Aristotelian metaphysics itself understood. Maritain explains:

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

Aristotle, in agreement with Socrates and all the Greeks, identifies the sovereign Good and Happiness. Now Happiness is, so to speak, the subjective side of the Good; in the concept of Happiness the notion of Good refers back to the subject. If there is no good, which is desired and loved more than happiness, it is inevitable that happiness should be desired and loved for the sake of the subject it beatifies.<sup>12</sup>

According to Aristotle's conception of happiness, man loves many things in and for themselves. Yet, once they are subsumed under happiness, i.e., once happiness becomes the supreme and presiding end, the desire for and love of this end is for the sake of the person it fulfills. Maritain concludes that:

[Aristotle's] moral teaching leaves us enclosed in love of ourselves. It is *my* good that I love and will in willing and loving Happiness as the supreme Good supremely loved, that is to say the Good taken subjectively, the Good as a perfection of the subject ... or as a fulfillment of human life.<sup>13</sup>

Maritain also tells us that the Stoics, responding to this problem in Aristotelian ethics, replaced the criterion of happiness with a new one, i.e., with the notion of accomplishing the Natural Law. That replacement removed the vicious circle.<sup>14</sup> In sum, Maritain thought that Aristotle had discovered the right approach to moral philosophy even though his solution involves the problems cited.

## Part Two: Christianity's Definition of the End of Man

### 1. The First Impact of Christianity on Moral Philosophy: Redefining the End of Man

For Maritain, Christian teaching on the end of man confronted human reason with surprises:

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 48-49.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

It came as a strange novelty to learn that the final End of human life—not only as supreme Value good in itself and for itself, but as the supreme Object the possession of which constitutes human happiness—is God Himself, the infinite Good, self-subsistent Being. God in His intimate life, the uncreated Glory itself is the end in which our appetite for happiness will be satisfied beyond measure.<sup>15</sup>

The end of man is now understood as God and not merely natural happiness. Human happiness is no longer seen to be limited to the satisfaction that comes from a full life virtuously lived; it is rather achieved in the possession of God, which is accompanied by saturating joy. In discussing the end of man, Maritain distinguishes three things.

1. God in His infinite goodness and lovability is the absolute ultimate end.
2. Man's possession of the absolute ultimate end, through which man enters into the divine fullness, is man's subjective ultimate End.
3. The possession of God and the fulfillment of all aspirations in the love of God produce joy in the soul, which is the joy of God Himself.

Maritain insists, not only on these three distinctions, but also on their mutual relationship. Desire for beatitude (the subjective ultimate end) is inseparable from love of the absolute ultimate end, while desire for God's joy is inseparable from desire for beatitude. However, desire for joy and beatitude are subordinate to love of God. Beatitude is loved, but God is loved more. Beatitude, as union with the Supreme Good, can only be loved truly (and subordinately) in and for the love of the subsistent Good loved supremely for itself.<sup>16</sup>

The egocentricity of eudaimonism is overcome. Man's primordial love for himself is torn away and directed toward God whose good we wish for more than our own. This is possible and even easy, not in the order of nature, but in the order of charity. Christian hope causes me to wish that God be mine, neither for myself nor by means of myself, but because I love God more than I love my happiness and myself.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

With Christianity, a new order of being—one that perfects the order of nature—discloses itself and involves a created nature in the life of God. St. Paul (I Cor. XIII, 13) identified three such supernatural principles: faith, which is the adherence of the intellect to things not seen, hope, which is confidence in one more powerful than oneself, and charity or love of God above all. These three humble dispositions, which are too weak to function as virtues in the natural order, constitute virtues in the divine order once they are ordered to God and exercise precedence over the powerful, natural (or *cardinal*) virtues.<sup>18</sup> Moral life thus embraces both the theological virtues and rules, which are proportional to the divine life, and the moral virtues and rules, which are proportioned to the life of reason within the order of nature.<sup>19</sup> The theological virtues need the natural virtues and the perfection of human life depends on charity.<sup>20</sup>

## 2. The Second Impact of Christianity on Moral Philosophy: Love of Friendship between God and Man

Christianity's second most significant impact on moral philosophy was to recast the relations between God and man: love is now possible. In the order of nature, a man loves the first cause by nature, but does not love God as his friend. Love between friends is a mutual relation between equals and man is not God's equal. Yet, in the order of charity, grace raises man to the supernatural order by sharing the very life and goods of God with man and by producing a community of life and goods, which involves a kind of equality that is a condition of friendship. This notion of communion with God is well beyond the reach of human reason and a scandal for pagans of every age.<sup>21</sup>

Christian moral philosophy, Maritain says, makes charity "the keystone of the whole edifice of morality."<sup>22</sup> Charity extends principally to God and secondarily to all men. The whole moral life of man depends on charity, i.e., this undivided love of God and love of neighbor. The

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

whole law consists in the precept to love God with our entire soul and the precept to love all men as our brothers.<sup>23</sup>

Charity impacts human life and conduct in ways that no pre-Christian moral philosopher could have imagined. In fact, Maritain sees charity as reversing values in regard to the perfection of human life. The Christian saint, for example, opens his very weakness to grace and draws his life from charity, which is unlike the Stoic hero of virtue. It is the saint's humility that receives grace and is paradoxically exalted.<sup>24</sup>

### 3. Reason Alone Articulates Only Part of Moral Philosophy

Christians and pagans both exercise the cardinal virtues. Yet, a man's moral experience that has been nourished by faith and its life of communion with God is different in ways that challenges the moral philosopher. Maritain says that if the moral philosopher fails to recognize them, then "he is leaving out things, which form an integral part of that human reality which he intends precisely to elucidate on the level of reflection" and that he "causes moral philosophy to quit the soil of existence and fly off into the void."<sup>25</sup> The entire enterprise of moral reflection is at stake.

Maritain says that reason and faith are two sources of morality, namely, natural law and the divine law, which includes the Old Law of Sinai and the New Law of the Gospels. Maritain says that the "precepts of the Decalogue are essentially a revealed formulation of the principles of natural law."<sup>26</sup> Yet, Maritain believes that it would be a mistake to lose sight of the Divine origin of the Ten Commandments.

Maritain fears that both natural morality and revealed morality are set at risk by transferring the prohibitions and prescriptions of the Decalogue to seemingly equivalent natural law rules. Although Maritain does not explain the risk, it is possible (in light of man's need to live in a conscious relation to God) that the Decalogue (being an account of how God requires men to love God and neighbor) must

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

remain highlighted in human consciousness as a divinely inspired set of rules precisely because those rules constitute a minimum that serves, not just the common good of human society (which is the domain of natural law) but, the good of the Kingdom to come. In other words, to lose sight of the Ten Commandments as divine expectations risks losing participation in the divine community now and possibly forever.

## Part Three: John Paul II On The End of Life

### 1. Human Nature's Quest for God

In the First Chapter of *Veritatis Splendor*, Pope John Paul II analyzes the meaning of the dialogue between Jesus and the “rich young man” that is reported in the 19<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Matthew. The outline is:

Question: What must I do to have eternal life?

Answer: Keep the commandments.

Question: All these have I kept; what still do I lack?

Answer: If you wish to be perfect, sell all you own, give the proceeds to the poor, and come, follow me.<sup>27</sup>

John Paul II interprets the young man's questions to be about the full meaning of life. This inquiry is not just that of a single individual, it is moreover the searching of man in response to the “absolute Good which attracts us and beckons us; it is the echo of a call from God which is the origin and goal of man's life.”<sup>28</sup> John Paul II says “the man who would understand himself thoroughly...must appropriate and assimilate the whole reality of the Incarnation and Redemption in order to find himself.”<sup>29</sup>

### 2. The Objective and Subjective Ultimate Ends of Life

John Paul cites scripture to establish the truth of the revelation that God alone is good in an unqualified way (Mt. 19:17 “There is only one

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<sup>27</sup> John Paul II, *The Splendor of Truth*, s. 6.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, s. 7.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, s. 8.

who is good;” and Mk. 10:18 “No one is good but God alone”). This uniquely and unqualifiedly good God is uniquely and unqualifiedly worthy of being loved, according to Mt. 22:37 “with all one’s heart, with all one’s soul, and with all one’s mind.”<sup>30</sup> This same good and lovable God “is the source of man’s happiness ... is goodness, fullness of life, the final end of human activity, and perfect happiness.”<sup>31</sup> God is the objective ultimate end of man and the source of perfect happiness, which is the subjective ultimate end of man.

### **3. God Answers the Question: What Good Must I Do to Have Eternal Life—To Be Perfect?**

John Paul II teaches that God has communicated to men what goods lead to eternal life. (Recall that Maritain emphasized these included observance of the natural law and the Decalogue, as well as living the life of grace.) Firstly, God has created man with wisdom and love and ordered him through natural law to his final end. Secondly, God taught what must be done and avoided in his ten commandments. And thirdly, Jesus’ kingdom of Heaven is a participation in the very life of God.<sup>32</sup> For John Paul, the commandments of the Decalogue, especially the prohibitions of murder, adultery, theft, and false witness, represent a first necessary step in the journey toward freedom from sin. They are only the beginning of freedom—not its perfection.<sup>33</sup> Jesus referred the young man to the two commandments (love of God and love of neighbor) as conditions required for eternal life.<sup>34</sup>

Beyond this baseline of eternal life and the moral perfection required for it, Jesus proposed yet another condition of a higher form of moral development. He does so in the form of a challenge: “If you want to be perfect...Come, follow me.” This is starkly simple, but it requires the plenitude of God’s gift of grace.<sup>35</sup> In addition to natural law and the Decalogue, and the two-fold law of love, Jesus also proclaimed a

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, s. 9.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, s. 12.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, s. 13.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, s. 14.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, s. 17.

“new commandment,” i.e., to “love one another even as I have loved you,” which requires also that we follow him perhaps even to our own cross.<sup>36</sup> John Paul II and Maritain agree on the basic goods that God has communicated to man that will lead to eternal life.

#### 4. Conclusions

Reason, represented by Aristotle, defined happiness as a composite final end for man that consisted of the best things of human life, i.e., wisdom, virtue, friendship, etc. So defined, happiness suffered from several faults. Focused on the fulfilled soul, reason fell into egoism. Stoics substituted the notion of accomplishing the natural law, which, though it sought to graft the dictates of reason onto the dispositions and passions of the soul, redirected attention from self to something transcendent, namely, to the natural law. All of this occurred in the realm of reason and without interaction with faith.

Christianity, as understood by Maritain, redefined the end of man, distinguishing an absolute or objective ultimate end, which is self-subsistent Being, from a subjective ultimate end, which is a vision of the essence of God. This possession of God fulfills all the aspirations of the soul and produces a joy that is the joy of God Himself. Egoism is avoided since beatitude—as union with the Supreme Good—can only be loved *truly* in and for the love of the subsistent Good loved supremely for itself. Charity extends principally to God and secondarily to all men. The whole moral life of man depends on charity, i.e., the whole moral life of man rests on this undivided love of God and love of neighbor.

John Paul II teaches that God is unqualifiedly good and lovable. God is the source of fullness of life and of man’s happiness. The love of God and neighbor is a condition of perfection, but adherence to the Decalogue is a minimum condition for eternal life. Thus both Maritain and John Paul rest Christian morality on charity that loves God to the fullest, and we conclude that Christian morality for them is a morality of the Divine Good supremely loved.

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, s. 20.