



The Moral Order

Cardinal Mercier

I. MORAL GOOD AND EVIL

30. There is a Real, Intrinsic Distinction between Moral Good and Moral Evil.

1. *Argument drawn from consciousness.* Certain things come before our consciousness as good and right, other things as bad and wrong, and this distinction imposes itself upon us with irresistible evidence. Similarly there are certain judgments about good and evil, justice and injustice, virtue and vice, the truth of which it is impossible to contest with any sincerity.

2. *Inductive argument.* Induction confirms the data of consciousness. The distinction between good and evil is always presented before us with such notes of necessity, universality and persistence — and this in spite of the contrary solicitations of passions and interests — that a sufficient reason for it can only be found in the objective manifestation of truth, or better, of compelling truths which are anterior to every code of merely human origin and independent of all contingent circumstances. Hence, short of denying the natural capacity of human reason to know the truth, and of thus logically professing scepticism, we must admit that the distinction between moral good and evil is founded on the very nature of things.

No doubt the application of moral principles to particular facts allows of divergencies and variations more or less considerable; but the root ideas of good and evil, of just and unjust, of lawful and unlawful, are the same at all times and among all peoples.

3. *Deductive argument.* Another argument may be drawn from the study of human nature itself. The good or right is by definition that which leads to the end of man's rational nature; conversely, we call wrong whatever is in opposition to the end of human nature. Now there must be some objects suitable, others unsuitable to human nature. Therefore between moral good and evil there must be a distinction which is founded on the nature of things.

31. The Distinction between the Goodness and Badness of Human Actions is not explained in its Ultimate Analysis by any Extrinsic or Positive Influence, whether Human or even Divine.

Many writers think that purely positive influences can account for this distinction, such as traditional prepossessions, social conventions or laws, or an absolutely free decree of God. Montaigne thought it enough to appeal to the prejudices created by education. Hobbes and Rousseau both made the civil law the foundation of morality. It would seem that Puffendorf, and before him Descartes, attributed to God's free will the power of creating the distinction made by us between moral good and evil.

In the first place, this distinction is not explained by any human influence, (a) The

nature of good and evil, as presented to our consciousness and reproduced in the invincible convictions of the human race, has already shown that the distinction between the rightness and wrongness of certain actions is independent of all positive intervention or system of government. A cause that is local, particular and changing cannot explain an effect that is universal, general and constant, (b) It is useless to have recourse with Hobbes to the despotic commands of an absolute monarch, or with Rousseau to the exigencies of a social contract; such commands or contracts do not themselves possess, ex hypothesi, an intrinsic goodness and consequently cannot communicate it to the acts which it is their purpose to regulate.

In the second place, this distinction does not rest on a free decree of the Divine Will. The opinion that makes the distinction between good and evil depend on the free will of God leads to inadmissible consequences: (a) God might then make blasphemy, perjury, violation of contracts, and the like obligatory upon us. (b) Whatever is morally good would be obligatory, and even heroism would be a duty forced upon us. (c) If all moral law owed its origin to a free act of the sovereign will of God, a positive revelation would be necessary for us to discern the difference between good and evil. Such conclusions as these condemn the principle from which they logically follow.

II. THE FOUNDATION OF THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN MORAL GOOD AND EVIL

32. The Distinction between Good and Evil is founded on the Natural Conformity or Non-conformity of our Acts with our Supreme End.

If the good is what answers to the natural tendency of a being, the moral good is what answers to the tendency of the rational nature of man and is that by which he perfects himself. Now the end of our rational nature is the knowledge and love of God together with the joy that results from this knowledge and love. Hence a morally good act is one which, whether directly or indirectly, helps us to know and love God, and in so doing contributes to the perfecting of our rational nature; similarly, a thing is morally good which is the object of a morally good act.

Moral evil, on the other hand, is what is in opposition to the end of our rational nature; it is the act which is prejudicial to the perfecting of our rational nature, or it is the object of this act; in its ultimate analysis it is whatever withdraws us from the perfect knowledge and love of the Supreme Being and from the happiness which these acts should bring us.

What, as a matter of fact, is the criterion by which we judge of the intrinsic morality of an action? Do we not always find it in the connection of this action with the perfection of our nature or, what comes to the same, in its connection with our supreme end? We condemn drunkenness and licentiousness, we look upon them as vices, because they degrade and disgrace us. We esteem temperance and chastity as true virtues, because they ennoble us and answer to the demands of our dignity as men.

33. Corollary.

Every good act is, at least implicitly or virtually, an act which contributes to the glory of God, just as every bad act is an offence against the majesty of God. Hence, St. Thomas teaches that every morally bad act, inasmuch as it cannot be referred to God, the last end of creation, is blame-worthy in His sight.

III. THE MORAL LAW

40. *Man is Subject to a Natural Law, that is, to an Inclination which habitually disposes him to know and will the End of his Rational Nature and what conduces to it, as well as to discern and reject what is contrary to it.*

1. *Argument from analogy.* Every being in this world has within it an inclination towards some end, and its law is to tend towards it. Man is no exception; he is likewise set towards his end. This end directs human activity by influencing the reason and the will; and this influence exercised by the end upon the higher faculties of man is called the natural law. Therefore man is under a natural law.

2. *Argument from consciousness.* Man is conscious that a higher attraction carries him on towards the good which his reason points out to him, and he yields to evil solicitation only by overcoming interior resistance and after self-reproach for his own weakness: hence the satisfaction that is given by the practice of virtue and the shame that follows an evil act.

3. *Argument drawn from Providence.* Before creating the world by His free act, God must have set Himself some end in view and have chosen means adapted to its realization. Being infinitely wise, He could not be deceived with regard to the relation of proportion between a creature and its end; being infinitely holy, He approved and willed this necessary relation; being infinitely powerful, He was able to bring it into being according to the capacity of the respective natures of the agents He created. God has therefore given to created beings an impulse towards their ends, a principle which directs their activities in conformity with the eternal designs of His Providence; in a word, He must have implanted in each created agent the natural law. Now this natural law must be in harmony with the constitution of the subject under its sway. The natural law implanted in man's nature, which is rational and free, cannot be, then, a fatalistic law; on the contrary, it must consist in an intellectual tendency to form some principles of reason with certainty, and in an impulse which, without forcing or necessarily determining the will, inclines it towards the real good apprehended by the intellect.

43. *Foundation of Moral Obligation.*

In the opinion of most Christian moralists since the time of Kant, moral duty admits of only one possible explanation, namely the authority of God, the supreme Legislator of the moral order as He is of the physical. If there is a difference of opinion it is only on the question whether it is His essence, His intellect, His will, or His intellect and will combined, which gives the obligatory character to the moral law.

What are the arguments on which this interpretation of moral duty is based? — There cannot be law, we are reminded, without a lawgiver, nor a command without a superior who has the power and right to issue commands to his subjects. Now God alone has the power and right to issue commands that have a universal and absolute value; in God alone then do we find the principle of moral obligation. And secondly, the theological interpretation of moral duty is the only one which separates us from the theories of 'the autonomy of reason' and 'independent morality' as put forward by the rationalistic schools.

However, it would seem to us, this necessity of choosing between the theological morality, as explained above, and autonomous morality is in no way forced upon us. Consequently we prefer to follow unreservedly the opinion of St. Thomas which makes the moral obligation rest on a double foundation — immediately, upon human nature; remotely, upon the intelligence of God who rules all things by His Providence.

45. The Ultimate Reason of the Distinction between Good and Evil, and consequently of Moral Obligation and Law, is found in God; it is formally in the Practical Reason of Him who has destined Beings to a Necessary Last End or, more briefly, in the Practical Reason of Providence.

God knows His own essence. He knows Himself as a necessary good. He accordingly knows how the beings He has power to create are related to His Essential goodness, and sees that every created being must of necessity have for its end the Divine Being, who alone is the necessary and infinite good.

If God wills creatures to exist distinct from Himself, it is impossible that He should not perceive by His practical reason the necessary relations of subordination which must exist between these creatures and the essential goodness of the Divine Being. These relations as conceived by the Divine Mind are 'the eternal law.' Such is the ultimate foundation of the distinction between good and evil, and of the natural law and of moral obligation.

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