

The Hinge of Morality

A Positive Christian Approach

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Although the essay that follows is set in specifically Christian terms and deals specifically with issues and problems that arise in current Catholicism, I have placed the essay in the SEEKERS' FORUM because I believe that the treatment of morality offered here is useful in the context of many religions. I encourage you to judge for yourself.

There are many approaches to Christian morality. There is, of course, the natural law approach of Thomas Aquinas, which has become fundamental to Catholic moral theology. There is the Vatican II approach, based on the four principles of social ethics and social justice (the dignity of human life, the common good, solidarity, and subsidiarity). And there are the more individualistic, less theological approaches based on the Christian Scriptures: the “obey the Ten Commandments” approach, the “Bible is my moral handbook” approach, the “choose your own morality, based on bible principles” approach, and others.

My preference is the “determine what’s right in terms of the Divine Plan for Universal Harmony and Peace” approach. The Scripture teaches us that the Divine Plan for Creation is that all things will be “gathered together” in Christ at the end of time, when he will surrender them to the Father, so that the Father will be “all in all.” (1Cor. 15:28.) This Divine Plan approach suggests that God’s plan for all creatures is that they behave toward all other creatures in a perfectly just and peaceful way. And so, our actions can be evaluated morally according to whether or not they conform with this Divine Plan.

This Divine Plan or intention is articulated clearly in Eph. 1:10, 1Cor. 15:20-28, and Col. 2. In Jn. 17, Jesus himself prays that “they may be one as you, Father, are in me and I am in you.” In addition, this Divine Plan is expressed repeatedly throughout the Hebrew and the Christian Scriptures. It is the reference for “your kingdom come” and for “your will be done” in the *Lord’s Prayer*, and it is the reason why we must “forgive those who trespass against us” if we ourselves desire the peace of God’s forgiveness. In fact, virtually every reference in the Scriptures to *justice* is a reference to this Divine Plan.

Nonetheless, no matter which approach to morality we prefer, the fact is that when we set all of these attempts to determine how we should act and how we shouldn’t against the backdrop of our understanding of who God is, they all pall. The Source of Existence, the Creator of All, the God of Love, the One Who Is—this God to whom we give these titles is ineffable, incomprehensible, unutterably powerful and magnificent. If we can say anything about this God, we might dare to say that this God has all creation, all existence, in his

“hands.” That is, there is nothing about creation which is not his intention. He creates everything that is, and he creates everything in order that it conform with his intention of universal peace and harmony. This means, of course, that since simple Love issues from the Creator, all existing things are imbued with his love—all creatures and also all the circumstances in which creatures find themselves.

These circumstances include what our Scriptures and our moral theologies call *sin* and *damnation* and *death*. But in the broad context of the God of the Universe holding all the worlds and planetary systems and galaxies in his creative power, these individual circumstances which we dread are trivialities. What might these trivialities mean to the God of All Creation—the Author of Life and the Source of Love? It is true that this great God cared enough about us who are so insignificant in the universe of galactic wonders to come among us to teach us himself and his ways. Surely this loving God has also blessed other worlds and whatever other sentient beings he has created in ways that benefit those other beings, as well.

My point here is that from the Divine perspective which we have presumed here, God’s whole intention is continually to draw all created things to himself. For us humans, that means that God is constantly flooding us with the grace to desire him more and to surrender ourselves—our minds, our hearts, our wills, our whole beings—to him more and more.

With these considerations in mind, I would like to suggest the following moral principles:

1. God is interested only in “positive” moral actions, that is, God cares about morality only to the extent that what people do accomplishes his intention of universal justice, peace, and loving harmony. (See e.g. 1 Peter 1:22.)
2. God is not interested in punishing anyone. The Scriptures say in their truth that what is construed as divine retribution is in fact formation and constructive discipline. (Hebrews 12:5-13.) When we act in ways that impede the fulfillment of the Divine Plan, we are guided by God’s grace (either by the consequences of our actions, or by guilt) toward accordance with the Divine Intention.
3. God views each human being as on his or her unique path to perfection in holiness, which means, in “God-like-ness.” God does not see human beings in the present life as perfect or able to reach perfection. God encourages us to strive toward perfection because such striving is in line with his intentions. However, God also knows that like infants trying to learn to walk, we fall often. Falling is integral to learning to walk one’s unique path toward perfection.

4. God allows individuals to continue on their paths toward perfection after the individual's death. (If there is any meaning to "purgatory," it is this.) It is holiness that God seeks, not punishment. At their deaths, the fullness of the Divine Presence opens to those who have learned moral goodness. Those who have not, continue to learn.
5. **Morally good actions** are those which fall entirely in line with God's intentions. These entirely perfect actions are rare. They require absolute surrender of self to God (that is, complete loss of recognition of identity, and complete loss of possession of knowledge and will), and with no sense of benefit on the part of the individual as he or she performs moral actions.
6. **Morally imperfect actions** are from God's viewpoint both bad and good simultaneously. These are the usual kind of human actions, even those which from our human perspective, we might style as "good."
7. There are four types of imperfect actions.
 - a. TYPE 1: an action which appears good externally, but which is motivated at least in part by an imperfect intention. An example is working at a soup kitchen with a mixed intention of serving the unfortunate and of receiving a good feeling from doing so. A second example is telling a joke at another person's expense. The laughter among the group of listeners is good in itself, in that it binds the group in momentary harmony. However, the motivation is faulty in that one of the elements shared by the group is the degrading of another person. In its most objectionable form, Type 1 action is hypocrisy, against which Jesus railed often, as when he scolded the Pharisees for praying in public in order to receive the people's approbation.
 - b. TYPE 2: an action which appears evil externally, but which is motivated by a good intention. There is a broad spectrum of ways we humans have developed to deal with this type of action. We may seek to appeal to a priority of goods, in defense of the action. For example, we justify killing in war by the argument that to take the life of one who is intent on killing you is of a higher priority of goodness than to allow the aggressor to take your life or the lives of your companions. In our society, we claim on different occasions that both the killer and the one killed are heroes.

In other circumstances, we designate the action as criminal, regardless of the intention. As an adolescent in the 1950s, I recall a news story about a Black man stealing a package of hotdogs from a convenience store in my city. The

White storekeeper chased him out onto the street and in the pursuit, shot him dead. The Black man, according to his wife, had stolen the meat because the family had no income and was starving. The storekeeper was acquitted in court. In this case, we have an external evil—theft—a criminal offense. However, from the viewpoint of morality, almost no one would argue that the starvation of the family should have a lesser priority than the commission of a petty theft.

- c. TYPE 3: an action which is morally neutral: it neither impedes nor advances the Divine Plan for universal harmony, and it is not intended to do either. Many intentional human actions are of this type, especially solitary actions, such as humming, diary writing or creative writing not to be seen by other people, imagining, wishing on stars, walking alone in moonlight, picking one's nose and other bodily functions, masturbation by people not participating in committed, sexually active relationships, engaging in a personal hobby or craft, snacking while watching television by oneself, writing letters never to be sent, and so on.
 - d. TYPE 4: an action which does injustice to other people and is motivated by an intention which is at least in part unjust to others. All of these actions are criminal or socially maladaptive. They cover a wide spectrum of damage to others and benefit to the perpetrator, from price gouging and theft of services, to lying to avoid the consequences of one's actions, to intimidation and coercion and enslavement, to willful murder of an unsuspecting or helpless victim, to despotism and genocide.
8. Type 4 actions, of course, are the most troubling from a human, social perspective. They are callous, and they disregard the human dignity of the victims. The evil of them is obvious in the indignity with which their perpetrators cloak themselves or in their perpetrators' craven lust for money or power. But where does the good of them lie? In the other three types of actions, the consequent good is generally easy to identify. In Type 1 actions, a good may be identified in the benefits of the externally good action. Likewise, in Type 2 actions, the possible good lies in the intentions of the actor. The good of these intentions may benefit others as well as the actor. In Type 3 actions, there is no direct social benefit and no contribution to the fulfillment of the Divine Plan, but one may see in this type of action secondary benefits to the individual which may obliquely prepare the individual to participate more openly or more lovingly in social interactions.

In Type 4 actions, however, there is no identifiable social benefit. The only benefits which arise from these actions are the escape from peril, or the profit, or

the self-aggrandizing pleasure which the perpetrator derives from them. These benefits, however, do not further the Divine Intention for Creation. How, then, can these actions be good as well as evil?

9. The answer to this question is the crux of the matter of moral goodness. In Type 4 actions, **and** in all other morally imperfect actions, the goodness lies in the eventual **realization** of their evil on the part of the perpetrator, but often more productively, on the part of the other members of society who observe the injustice of these behaviors.

The emblematic Type 4 action was the *sho'ah*, the Nazi extermination of East European Jews and other outcasts during the Second World War. This program of genocide on the part of the German government of the time clearly made no direct contribution to the establishment of universal peace and harmony. Indeed, the desecration of the dignity of the innocent victims of this crime was a horrendous affront to the Divine Plan.

Nonetheless, the Divine Plan was advanced in two ways, because two groups of people drew closer to fulfillment of the Divine Intention because of it. The first group is the Nazi perpetrators themselves, as well as their agents in this crime. According to this present analysis, each of the perpetrators was created by God to be on his or her individual path to holiness, that is, the path to surrender of self to God and the achievement of full union with God. Presumably, during the commission of these crimes against the Jews, the Nazi perpetrators were anything but committed to the Divine Plan for universal harmony. They were, rather, committed to the benefits which they found in the crimes themselves: the personal power and self-satisfaction, monetary profit, recognition, professional advancement, and among the idealists, the fulfillment of the philosophical goals of the Third Reich. But these benefits “in the world” simply delayed their progress in becoming holy.

At some point “in time,” these perpetrators will **have to** realize the immense horror of the atrocities which they inflicted on other human beings, and filled with regret, they will have to beg forgiveness not only from God but from their victims—their brothers and sisters in creation—as well. This is a necessary step in their approach to God, and to repeat, it **will have to** take place. The reason for this necessity is that at the end of time God will be “all in all.” Jesus will present to the Father **all** of creation, every creature, joined with one another in the peace and harmony of self-sacrificing love. St. Paul most appropriately writes: “For Jesus is our peace, he who made both one and broke down the dividing wall of enmity, through his flesh, . . . that he might create in himself one new person in place of the

two [Jew and Gentile], thus establishing peace, and might reconcile both with God, in one body, through the cross, putting that enmity to death by it.” (Ephesians 2:14-16.)

It is impossible to conceive that there will be any “left-overs” when Jesus gathers all creation together in the holiness that all creatures have grown into (by the grace of God), and presents them to God, to live in peace and loving harmony with one another and to live in blissful union with the God of Love. God cannot be “all in all” if some creatures are left out of the state of union with God. And so it follows that every creature must mature in holiness at some point and enter into union with God and with every other creature. Even the Nazi perpetrators must mature in this way. For the Kingdom of God to come to completion—for God to reign in every heart—the Nazi perpetrators *must* repent, seek forgiveness from their victims, and by doing this, find salvation, which is life in God.

Those who realized the horror of their crimes before they died, and repented before God, will after death continue on the path of purity of heart, of surrender to God, and of generous love of those around them. They will continue with this process with the aid of the loving grace of God. They will be drawn toward it, they will recognize how far they are from loving perfectly, and they will yearn to be able to love in that way—surrendered completely to God, yielding their minds to God, and their feelings and their wills and their whole strength. Through grace and through the growth in them of love for others, they will eventually grow to full stature in Christ and love with abandonment of self. They will have finished the purification, and they will join in union with the God of Love.

Those, on the other hand, who died without realizing the magnitude of their crimes, will have died with hardness still in their hearts. They will have died with no love for God nor for those strangers to them whom he created. The loving God, in this case, as Dr. Scott Hahn concludes, will give them what they wish: a place separate from God. God will nonetheless continue to love them, as is his nature. This constant love of God pouring over them and offering them nourishment, in disregard of their desire not to have it, will be torment to them—the torment which we call *hell*.

But again, this torment cannot last forever. These people cannot be excluded from the Kingdom of God because if they were, God could not be “all in all.” And so, we conclude that at some point, the condemned will give up their resistance and surrender to God: “That’s it. I give up. You win.” This surrender to the stronger power may not be humble or contrite. But they will continue to be graced to resume their journeys to holiness, until they face and accept their

responsibility for the horror of what they did to God's innocents during the *sho'ah*. After that terrible realization, they will be fit to continue the purgation of their imperfections and to grow in holiness until they come at last to be united fully with the God of Love.

When the last of the hard-hearted comes under the Kingship of Jesus and enters into this union with God—that is, the hard-hearted one called Lucifer and Satan and the Devil—, all purgation will end, universal peace and loving harmony will thrive among all people, and God will be all in all.¹

The Divine Plan will have been achieved.

10. The second group to benefit from the evil of the *sho'ah* is humanity itself, or at any rate, those societies which were paying attention to the Nazi atrocities done to the Jews and the others. These societies witnessed the evil of ethnic hatred on an unimaginable scale. During the decades that followed, one society after another came to reflect on its own structural ethnic hatred and to recognize the injustice, if not the horror, of its own sin against its minority citizens. Then the process of social change ensued, as many in the majority class joined with the oppressed minority class to create within the confines of the society a more just social order. Thus it was with regard to the *campesinos* in Latin America and the Hispanic farm workers in the United States; also with regard to the Civil Rights of Black Americans; also with regard to the self-determination of the oppressed majority Black Africans in the nation of South Africa, and so on. The slaughter of the seven million in the *sho'ah*, over the following seven decades, has given birth to freedom from oppression and to the right of self-determination—that is, to justice—for hundreds of millions of people worldwide. Such justice is the single necessary foundation for life in peace on this planet. For, when people feel that they are treated unjustly by others, they rebel and war ensues. But when they feel that they are being treated justly, they are prepared to live in peace with their neighbors.
11. Type 4 actions, such as the *sho'ah*, clearly demonstrate that the good which derives from these evil actions lies in the **recognition** by the individual perpetrator, and also by an attentive society, of the harm which these actions cause individuals and the damage which is done to the intention of justice and peace, whether this is seen to be the Divine Intention or the ultimate admirable intention of secular humanity.

The general point is, however, that this recognition is the great good to be derived by individuals and by attentive societies from imperfect moral actions of

all four types. Whatever contributions to the achievement of the Divine Intention for Creation the good aspects of Type 1 and Type 2 make, the ultimate good which derives from Type 1 and Type 2 actions is the same recognition of individual harm and of damage to the intention of peace and justice which derives from Type 4 actions. This is to say that with respect to any non-neutral morally imperfect action, the ultimate good which derives from it is the spiritual growth that results from the recognition of the harmful impact which the imperfections of the action have on the Divine Plan for Universal Peace and Harmony.

12. And so, from the Divine perspective which we have adduced here, all morally imperfect actions are both evil and good: evil in their direct impact on the people who are victimized by the actions, and good in the long-term spiritual growth which springs from the individual and societal recognition of the damage to justice and peace which the evil of the action caused.

The evil of morally imperfect actions, then, complicates and impedes the fulfillment of the Divine Plan for Creation because of the chaos and hatred and animosity it causes. Nonetheless, this evil (eventually) stimulates long-term spiritual growth in the individuals and societies which recognize and reflect on the evil action and on its parallels in their own individual and societal lives. It is this long-term spiritual growth which is the focus of God's attention. God nurtures it with his love and grace so that it will eventually blossom into universal justice and loving peace.

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¹ Some, when they encounter this argument, protest: Didn't Jesus teach that hell is eternal? The answer is "not exactly." At issue is the notion of time and duration which was available when Jesus taught. We do not know how Jesus taught this idea in his native Aramaic language. The Gospels, as we have received them, are written in the Greek language of the First Century. Now, the situation is this: The Greek texts of the Gospels and of the letters of Paul use the same word, *aionion*—which is usually translated as "eternal"—for the *eternal* torments of hell (e.g., *eis to pur to aionion*, "into the eternal fire," Mt. 25:41), for the *eternal* life of heaven (e.g., *eis zoen aionion*, "into eternal life," Mt. 25:46), and for God himself (e.g., *tou aioniou theou*, "of the eternal God," Rom. 16:26.)

However, the First Century Greek word *aionion* does not have the same meaning as our Twentieth Century word *eternal*. The Greek word *aionion* means "having a long duration." In the Seventeenth Century, *aionion* was taken into English as the word "eon." In English, the word *eon* means "a long duration of time." An eon is "an age." And "for eons" means "for ages and ages," that is, "for a long, long duration of time into the future."

This meaning of the word *eon* in English is exactly the meaning of the First Century Greek word *aionion*. It means, "for an age," or "for a long duration of time." The fact that the Christian writers used

this word *aionion* of the existence of God, in an attempt to express the limitlessness of God's existence, demonstrates that **First Century Greek did not have a way to express *eternity***.

When we speak of *eternity* in Twentieth Century theological English, we are referring to "timelessness." *Eternity* means "existence in the simple present moment." There is no duration in *eternity*. There is no past and there is no future in *eternity*. There is only the single, present moment. The First Century Greeks simply could not express this idea. They had no word for the timeless nature of eternity, for the concept of a simple present moment, without duration, without past or future.

It was not until the Sixth Century after Christ that the Christian theologian Boethius introduced this difficult concept of a timeless *eternity*. [Catholic Encyclopedia; see **eternity**.] So the Gospel texts, written five hundred years earlier, in the First Century, described hell, heaven, and God himself by using the word *aionion*, a word which did not mean *eternal* in the sense of "without time," but rather, meant *for eons*, that is, "going on and on in time into the ages."

So there is no justification for translating the word *aionion* in the Christian texts as *eternal*, in the modern theological sense of the word. [The fact is that most Christians do not know this technical meaning of *eternal*, and read the word as meaning "everlasting," that is "going on and on in time into the endless future."]

Moreover, it is true that in the Christian Scriptures, the word *aionion* is applied to the existence of God, and thus, in the developed theology of Christianity is now taken to mean *eternal* in the sense of "without time or duration." But it does not follow logically that because *aionion* is translated with reference to God as *eternal* in the theological sense, that the word *aionion*, when it is applied to hell—and even, to heaven—must likewise be translated as "eternal." The word *aionion* simply does not have that meaning. If modern scholars choose to translate the word as "eternal" because their theology compels them to, it does not follow that *aionion* translates as "eternal" in every context in which it appears.

And so, there is no linguistic evidence from the texts of the Christian Scriptures which clearly depicts or characterizes hell (or heaven, for that matter) as "eternal." The Greek word which is used to characterize hell might be translated just as correctly as "going on for a long while." And since conceiving of hell in this way—as being of long but limited duration—appears to be more consistent with what we know of the loving nature of God and of his Plan for Creation, we do so in our inquiry here. Nothing stands in the way of doing this except insistent dedication to the certainties of the past, which we now know to be doubtful and anachronistic.

So let us rejoice that even hell is not forever. Rather, God's mercy and grace will gather **every** creature to himself, the gates of hell will truly be shattered, and when all people achieve the holiness intended by God for them individually and the justice that God intended for them communally, then all creation will rest in God, and God will truly be "all in all."