

Separating Good from Evil

(Excerpts from the second in a series of three articles)

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As the term is used in the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church, judgment means essentially acceptance and rejection, especially acceptance and rejection which result in the separation of good from evil (see *Arcana Coelestia* 5078:6, 4810, 1850:5). The exercise of judgment is therefore an integral part of freedom; and as freedom, together with rationality, is the essence of humanity, judgment enters into the life of every person.

Eventually every person becomes the subject of judgment after death. Before that, throughout his life on earth a person is frequently under the necessity of judging other people whose lives and uses touch and may affect his own—of accepting or rejecting them entirely or in part. This raises certain questions. What kind of judgments may properly be made, and indeed must be made for the preservation of freedom? What judgments are beyond human ability and should therefore not be attempted? In those judgments which are allowable, what are the criteria that should be followed? My purpose here is to present the teachings of the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church which bear upon these and related questions and to consider some of their implications.

The Lord's Judgment

Even the most ardent literalist would have difficulty in maintaining that “Judge not, that you be not judged” is the whole teaching of Scripture on the subject; for on another occasion the Lord said, “Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment” (Matthew 7:1; John 7:24). It is not judgment itself that is forbidden, but judgment from the self and according to appearance. Without civil and criminal courts, without moral sanctions and the judgment of public opinion they imply, without character judgments in public life, society would disintegrate. Therefore the Heavenly Doctrine teaches that judgment of the natural lives of people, of their civil and moral life, far from being prohibited, is altogether necessary for the preservation of society and of human freedom (see *Arcana Coelestia* 2284:3; *Conjugal Love* 523; *Verbo* 15).

Yet there is a judgment that is forbidden to people, not because the Lord arbitrarily reserves it for Himself, but because He alone can make it! That is spiritual judgment—judgment of a person's spiritual state and therefore of his eternal lot after death. Here a person could judge only “according to the appearance”, and appearances are never more deceptive than in this area. In this world, the Heavenly Doctrine notes, a person who is evil interiorly can counterfeit what is good in externals, and one who seems to be evil may have good within; with the result that a thousand people may seem alike in externals, may even speak and act alike, and yet be altogether different as to the interior things of faith, love and life (see *Arcana Coelestia* 2284:3).

The ends or loves of a person's life, which determine his eternal lot after death, are known only to the Lord. He alone knows the quality of his spiritual life. Therefore it is only the Lord who knows what a person's spiritual state is, what it will be, and thus what his lot will be after death. As we cannot know these things, we are forbidden in the Heavenly Doctrine to make spiritual judgments (see *Arcana Coelestia* 2284:3; *Conjugal Love* 523; *Verbo* 15).

Some people will, of course, persist in making spiritual judgments, either because they do not know of the prohibition or because they suppose that they are in some way exempt, but theirs is an impossible task. The Heavenly Doctrine insists that a person can never be judged from external habits as to what his life will be after death. Frequently, they tell us, those whom people judged harshly in this world are good in the other life, and those whom people judged well in the life of the body are evil (see *Spiritual Experiences* 2459, 1299, 4426e. cf. *Arcana Coelestia* 2284:4). People do not know how to judge except from externals, nor do they know whether others act from ignorance or not, or what was their intention, since the end or intention is known to the Lord alone. For in the life of the body people can, to a considerable degree because of human limitations, conceal their true character.

We are not, then, to judge the spiritual states of other people, assigning them definitely to heaven or to hell, though it is of charity to hope and even assume that our friends and loved ones go to heaven and to give others the benefit of the doubt! It is true that the Heavenly Doctrine permits a general, conditional judgment. The teaching is that a general judgment such as this is permitted: if you are in internals as you appear to be in externals, you will be saved or you will be condemned. But a judgment such as this is forbidden: you are such and such in internals, therefore you will be saved or condemned (see *Conjugal Love* 523). Obviously, this conditional judgment is of a very different kind. It takes into account the possibility of externals being misleading; it allows for a possibility of change; and it is made, not for the purpose of disposing of other people, but as a basis for appropriate action—for exercising free choice and for determining how charity is to be shown to them as the neighbor. It is a means of deciding our proper relation to them now, without prejudice to their future lot.

Implications of These Teachings

Such is the teaching. We cannot judge other people spiritually, for good or ill, and we are therefore forbidden to try. And the teaching is given without exceptions. Nowhere does the Heavenly Doctrine indicate that regenerating people are able to judge the spiritual states of others. The uniform teaching is that only the Lord, who alone sees everything that is in a person, can do so. The love and faith which are of a person's spiritual life lie hidden away in his interiors, where they are not known to anyone except the Lord, and for this reason it is said that we are not to think evilly about them (see *Arcana Coelestia* 4633e, 6214:2; *Apocalypse Explained* 629e).

Yet this does not mean that evil is not to be judged! Evil is to be recognized as such, condemned, dealt with decisively and appropriately, whenever and wherever it appears. Wickedness is not to be ignored, condoned or explained away, but combated firmly as what it is. Only, the judgment must be just. Without imputing a spiritual motive to a person, without presuming to judge his spiritual state, we can and should judge the evil he has done, and impose on the evildoer the sentence merited by his wickedness.

It is here that confusion may arise. People may hesitate to condemn evil and wickedness, lest in doing so they make a spiritual judgment. And it has happened that people against whom appropriate action was taken for specific transgressions have complained bitterly that they were the victims of unlawful spiritual judgments when, in fact, no such judgment was passed or

intended. People can be judged guilty of certain evils without any reference to their spiritual state and final lot being involved. For the protection of society this distinction needs to be understood and preserved (See *Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture* 51:5).

However, if we cannot judge the spiritual states of others, except conditionally and in general, neither can we pass final judgment upon our own spiritual states” (See *Arcana Coelestia* 2284:3). This is for our protection, and to keep the way open for repentance and reformation. Paradoxical though it may seem, if a person knew beyond all doubt that he was saved he would surely be lost, for he would cease from all further striving. And, if a person were convinced that he was lost, it is certain that he could not be saved, for he would not begin to make any effort. The Heavenly Doctrine offers us many aids to self-examination, and by following their wise and searching counsel we may learn a great deal about ourselves. Yet we can do no more, and nothing more is really necessary, than judge ourselves conditionally and generally, saying to ourselves: If I am in internals what I seem to be in externals and do not change, I may be saved, or, I will be condemned. And even such a judgment as that should not be made except as a basis for appropriate action in the form of repentance of life. It should not be made as an end in itself, or to gratify a morbid delight in self-accusation, but as a means to the acceptance of good and the rejection of evil.

Human Judgment

On other planes of life than the spiritual, however, human judgment is not only permitted by the Lord, it is necessary for the proper functioning of society and for protection and preservation of freedom in the home and in social life. Humanity contains men and women in a great variety of states, both good and bad, and animated by many different motives, and not all of them are necessarily what they profess themselves to be. Candidates for elective office cannot always be accepted entirely on the testimony of their own campaign literature; prospective business associates or employees may or may not prove to be trustworthy. And we naturally wish to exercise some judgment in the formation of intimate friendships and in trying to influence those of our children.

There is a need for judgment in these things, and the Heavenly Doctrine assures us that it is perfectly proper for us to examine the civil and moral lives of people from their words and actions with a view to discovering as accurately as possible their usefulness in public life, their honesty in business, their reliability and suitability for certain kinds of work, their character, and whether they show the qualities that would make them desirable friends for our children or ourselves. Without judgments of this kind freedom would be impossible—there would be many disasters and tragedies; society could scarcely survive (see *Spiritual Experiences* 1220, 4425).

We are warned, however, that while everyone may judge the civil life of another person, morality may properly be judged only in so far as it concerns the civil plane. We are not permitted to judge how far a person’s moral principles or virtues cooperate with faith or what he is as to faith (See *Spiritual Experiences* 1220, 4425). Judgments of this kind are to be entirely apart from spiritual judgment in intent, scope and implication, for the things that are expressly forbidden here infringe on spiritual judgment. When we judge a person’s civil life, and his life in

society as far as its quality shows itself, there should be no intention on our part to judge his spiritual state, and that should be understood by others as clearly as possible.

And in those areas in which judgment is our responsibility we should strive to “judge with righteous judgment.” The judges in Israel, we are told, were not to judge from themselves, but from the Lord. They judged from the law of Moses, and thus from the Word which is from the Lord. It is added that even at this day judgment is administered from the Lord when it is done from conscience, in accordance with truths (see *Arcana Coelestia* 9160). From conscience, in accordance with truths! If we would judge our associates justly, and with mercy, the judgment may not come from ourselves or from other people. Our own prejudices, and the stereotypes of religious, racial and political groups, can only subvert or pervert the course of justice when our task is to assess the qualities of individual men and women.

It should be our hope and intention to make judgments from the Lord, and from good as well as truth, so that while our judgments will be formed only by our understanding of the truth of the Word, they will be charged with compassion. In this way we will be able to avoid many miscarriages of justice. We will try to judge people as their words and deeds show them to be, not as we presuppose them to be or want them to be, or as our own self-advantage might be affected by our judgment. We will realize that it is part of charity to recognize, condemn and punish evil, but, having done so, we will be able to show a compassion that is worlds apart from sentimentality. We will not be among those self-appointed censors whose main task and delight in life seems to be judging others, usually harshly and often unjustly. We will come to realize, gradually, that there are many judgments that need never be made at all, and that there are many instances in which we can estimate an action without having to judge the person at all. And more and more will we come to understand that one of the highest forms of judgment is confidence—a confidence that will lead us to suspend judgment until all the relevant facts are in, and dispose us to give others the benefit of the doubt whenever there is reasonable grounds for doing so, rather than assuming a person’s guilt or unworthiness until he confesses it.

The judgment of people in civil and moral life poses serious problems, and it would be a dangerous oversimplification to suppose that if we only look to the Lord, then, without further effort on our part, all our judgments will inevitably be just (see *Arcana Coelestia* 3759, 8121, 5382; *True Christian Religion* 317e). For one thing, the right exercise of judgment calls for rationality, and for this reason it would seem that we should exercise great care in making our stronger judgments known to our children, lest they take them over as a body of prejudices.

Also, people are to be judged by their words or by their deeds. We know that motive is very important, but we also understand that the deepest motive, a person’s ruling love, cannot be uncovered. What we can discern is only a relatively external motive. Certainly what people *intended* must qualify our thinking about the deeds themselves, and we may sometimes have to take their word for the intention! But a person’s words may be sadly at variance with his deeds. Good intentions if sincere (and we must not judge too quickly that they are not) will eventually find a way to ultimate themselves in good deeds, even if they may be frustrated for a time. If the gap between protestation and performance is too long in being closed, or remains unalterably open, we may remember the Gospel adage that people shall be known by their fruits. But it is

only by frequent and thoughtful resort to the Heavenly Doctrine that we may learn not to judge according to appearances, but to judge “with righteous judgment.”

Finally, it may be asked, to what extent can we judge ourselves on the civil and moral planes? On the civil plane, self-judgment is relatively easy and can be extensive. To the extent of our knowledge of the law, we know when we have broken it, and without probing too deeply we can discover, with a little honesty, why we stay within the law and what our reaction is to the belated discovery that we have broken a law. We can see whether we really regard ourselves as being under the law or above it. On the moral plane, self-examination cannot discover so much. We may scarcely hope to be able to judge ourselves as to the entire range of the moral virtues at all times. But we can know when we are in certain virtues, even if it is not clear why we are. We can know when we are being temperate, sincere, or diligent, and that may help us to further examine and judge ourselves.

Conclusion

In any area, judgments should be made only for the sake of use—for the sake of seeing what is good and what is evil, in order that good may be accepted and evil may be rejected and thus separated from the good. Otherwise judgment will degenerate into pointless, destructive criticism and condemnation, which may harm uses and certainly does not help the critic. Where no use will be served, we may well ask ourselves whether judgment is necessary, and when there is a use, our judgment should be restricted to those things which properly come within the human province.

This is important, not only so that justice may reign in human relations, but for our own future. It is true that with what judgment people judge, they are judged, and that with what measure they use, it shall be measured to them again. If we judge consistently from the self, then we will become the kind of people who eventually bring upon themselves the judgment of those in whom the evil self has become dominant. But if we have tried sincerely to judge with righteous judgment—to judge from the Lord, from the Word, and from conscience instead of from self—then we will ourselves be judged, not according to appearances which might condemn any person, but with perfect justice.