Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 28 | Issue 1 Article 7

1-1-2011

"The Monstrous Centaur"? Joseph De Maistre on Reason, Passion and Violence

Douglas Hedley

"THE MONSTROUS CENTAUR"? JOSEPH DE MAISTRE ON REASON, PASSION AND VIOLENCE

Douglas Hedley

This essay remarks upon a seeming paradox in the philosophical anthropology of Joseph de Maistre (1753–1821). He presents a traditional Platonic asymmetry of reason and the passions. This is put to the service of an Origenistic-universalistic theology that revolves around questions of guilt, punishment and redemption and a theory of sacrifice. Maistre is far from being the irrationalist that many political theorists observe, even if he presents an antagonistic relationship between reason and passions, the rational self and its desires. The apparently grim and sanguinary Platonism of the Savoyard Count can be neatly compared with Kant and contrasted with Hume's sanguine, if not breezy, view of reason as a slave to the passions.

> The entire earth, perpetually steeped in blood, is nothing but an immense altar on which every living thing must be immolated without end, without restraint, without respite, until the consummation of the world, until the extinction of evil, until the death of death.[1]

These are the famous words of Joseph de Maistre: the "friend of the executioner" (Stendahl).[2] This is the thinker described as "a fierce absolutist, a furious theocrat, an intransigent legitimist, apostle of a monstrous trinity composed of Pope, King and Hangman, always and everywhere the champion of the hardest, narrowest and most inflexible dogmatism, a dark figure out of the Middle Ages, part learned doctor, part inquisitor, part executioner" (Emile Faguet).[3] Joseph-Marie, Comte de Maistre (1753–1821) was a Savoy diplomat of French stock in the service of the Kingdom of Sardinia as ambassador to Russia (1803–1817) and in Turin (1817–1821). A trenchant critic of the French Revolution, he viewed it as the apotheosis of the atheism and philosophical empiricism of the Enlightenment. For Maistre, the core of Enlightenment ideology was the denial

[1]Maistre, *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*, translated as *St Petersbourg Dialogues*, trans. R. A. Lebrun (Montreal, 1993), 217.

[2]Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (New York, 1953), 66. Cf. Emile Faguet, *Politiques et Moralists du dix-neuvieme siècle* (Paris, 1899), 1.

[3]Berlin, "Introduction," *Considerations on France* (Cambridge, 1994), xi.

of God, the view of morality as essentially secular and the belief in the inevitability of progress. Unfortunately, his savage critique of Enlightenment optimism has been misinterpreted as the avowal of violence and irrationalism. Isaiah Berlin saw Maistre as a harbinger of the "Fascist inner passion."[4] Maistre develops in his *Soirees de St Petersbourg* Platonic dialogue a theodicy which is, at the same time, a theory of redemption: evil reveals God's plan for mankind, which is the expiation of guilt through vicarious suffering—represented by the shedding of blood in sacrifice, and more remotely in execution and war. Yet this is not the whole theory: "Y a-t-il quelque chose de plus certain que cette proposition: tout a été fait par et pour l'intelligence?"[5] ("Is there anything more certain than the proposition that everything has been made by and for intelligence?")[6] It strikes me that any philosopher who proposes that the universe is grounded *in and for reason* is a very unlikely precursor of the Fascist 'vision.' Indeed, it may be more accurate to view Maistre as a prophet of the paradoxical cruelty of 'secular' ideologies.

We can dispose of the proto fascist label easily. Yet Maistre remains, many would suggest, a morally questionable figure. Does he not rejoice in suffering, draconian punishment and violence? Is he not the embodiment of a grotesque militarism that is such a shameful legacy of the Christian tradition? If that challenge is correct, then the famed eloquence of Maistre's pen is put to the service of a cruel philosophy. My answer is twofold. Firstly, the challenge confuses the descriptive with the normative. Maistre is describing the violence of the world as it appears to him. His perception may be false, but that is quite different from advocating such suffering and violence! Secondly, his theology is that of a lamb in wolf's clothing. For all his sombre pronouncements, Maistre, like F. D. Maurice in England, or his own venerated Origen, is robustly universalist. Here he departs from the mainstream of Western theology in the wake of Augustine's doctrine of grace and its influence in those grim theories of double predestination that emanated from the African doctor.

Voltaire and the Ambivalence of Violence

Maistre is deeply opposed to Voltaire's claim that "Certainement qui est en droit de vous rendre absurde est en droit de vous rendre injuste." ("Whoever can make you accept absurdity, can make you commit injustice.")[7] Voltaire presented Christianity as not just false but immoral. Through his *Candide*, Voltaire is the thinker most associated with the critique of theodicy. His *Traité sur la Tolérance à l'occasion de la mort de Jean Calas* of 1763 is

---

[4]Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal: Six Enemies of Human Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 153.

[5]Maistre, *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*, 383.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Voltaire, *Questions sur les Miracles* (1765), ed. Louis Moland, *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire* (Paris: Garnier, 1877-1885), tome 25 (357-450).

a critique of iniquity perpetrated in the name of religion, inspired by the persecution and execution of the French Protestant Jean Calas by the Toulouse magistrature, the last man to be executed on the wheel in France on the trumped-up charge of murdering his son (in all likelihood it was a suicide). Voltaire's moving and scathing critique of the cruelty inflicted upon Calas became celebrated throughout Europe and thirty-nine of Voltaire's works were placed upon the Index. One gains a sense of the more intransigent and polemical side of Maistre's nature in his remarks about the doubtful innocence of Calas. Yet it is perhaps helpful to view his metaphysics of punishment in the context of the controversy raised by Voltaire.

Maistre's interest in punishment is philosophical, not pathological. Generally a philosophical justification of punishment is either retributive (e.g., Kant or Hegel) or consequentialist (e.g., Hobbes or Rousseau): either punishment redresses an intrinsic wrong or produces favourable results for society at large (e.g., protection from violence, theft or dishonesty). Many of Maistre's Enlightenment 'opponents' maintain that the 'just desert' of retributive punishment is either atavistic (i.e., revenge) or illusory (because metaphysically impossible). Some, like Foucault, may claim that punishment merely reflects the desire to exert power over others.[8] Both the ultra-liberal and the Foucault positions rest upon the anti-Platonic view that there are no objective values. For both the liberals and Foucault, punishment is just a human institution, not a natural fact—and it could theoretically be dispensed with. For Maistre, punishment is not an arbitrary fact about human society but reflects a spiritual law of punishment. Warfare and punishment are indexes of mankind's duality: man is, for Maistre, "the monstrous centaur."[9]

I think that this Platonic dimension of Maistre's thought can be seen in his emphasis upon the mirroring of eternal justice upon earth, however obliquely. The executioner represents order amidst disorder. For all the horror of his acts, they are not—*pace* Foucault—the expression of brute power. Let us consider the notorious executioner passage. It is remarkable in its imaginative engagement with the person of the executioner, as well as his ambivalent status in society:

> In outward appearance he is made like us; he is born like us. But he is an extraordinary being, and for him to be brought into existence as a member of the human family a particular decree was required, a FIAT of creative power.[10]

What does Maistre imply with the allusion to the 'Fiat Lux' of the Vulgate? In the creation story of Genesis, God creates heaven and earth and light and darkness, and the light is good. Maistre suggests that the executioner is an organ of Divine justice: "There is then in the temporal sphere a divine and

---

[8]Foucault, M. *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin, 1977), 23 (on the idea of the 'technology of power').

[9]Ibid., 36.

[10]*St Petersburg*, 19.

visible law for the punishment of crime. This law, as stable as the society it upholds, has been executed invariably since the beginning of time. Evil exists on the earth and acts constantly, and by a necessary consequence it must constantly be repressed by punishment."[11] Rather than akin to the *bellum omnium contra omnes* of Hobbes, Maistre's perspective is quite the opposite: resolutely providentialist. For Hobbes, sovereignty is grounded in the pressing need to combat the chaotic violence of man's natural state. For Maistre, the existence of society at all presupposes the victory of *justice*, however imperfectly realised, over sheer power. The institution of capital punishment is a shadow of the eternal and immutable divine law that lies at the basis of human association and society. Whereas the God of Hobbes is at best a *Deus absconditus*, for the Platonic Maistre God is the transcendent source of earthly and temporal justice and order. In the words of Dante:

> La gloria di colui che tutto move
>
> per l'universo penetra e risplende
>
> in una parte più e meno altrove.[12]

Maistre avers that we must turn our eyes to the invisible world as the explanation of the visible, "tenons nos yeux fixes sur ce monde invisible qui expliquera tout."[13] Even when considering the person of the executioner, Maistre sees him as part of a broader providential scheme, notwithstanding the horror of his work:

> Consider how he is viewed by pubic opinion, and try to conceive, if you can, how he could ignore this opinion or confront it! Scarcely have the authorities assigned his dwelling, scarcely has he taken possession of it, when other men move their houses elsewhere so they no longer have to see his. In the midst of this seclusion and in this kind of vacuum formed around him, he lives alone with his female and his offspring, who acquaint him with the human voice. Without them he would hear nothing but groans. . . .
>
> Is this a man? Yes. God receives him in his shrines and allows him to pray. He is not a criminal, and yet no tongue would consent to say, for example that he is virtuous, that he is an honest man, that he is admirable, etc. No moral praise seems appropriate for him, since this supposes relationships with human beings, and he has none.
>
> And yet all greatness, all power, all subordination rests on the executioner.[14]

Maistre is speculating about the *anomalous* status of the executioner. He stands without relation to other creatures. Moral categories seem subverted. While necessary for the well-being of the state, the executioner is regarded with a mixture of anxiety and awe by his fellows. Yet this uncanny figure is presented psychologically from a very human perspective.

---

[11] *St Petersburg*, 20.

[12] "The glory of Him who moves all things penetrates the universe and shines in one part more and in another less." Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, 3 *Paradiso* (Oxford, 1939), 18–19.

[13] Maistre, *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*, 661.

[14] Maistre, *St Petersburg*, 19.

Maistre depicts the literally dreadful loneliness of the executioner's role. The executioner is an organ of justice and yet isolated from human contact: only his own family "acquaint him with the human voice." In this short passage, sometimes cited by critics as evidence for Maistre's sadism, we find a remarkable empathy for the human being performing this grim task.

Maistre uses the thought-experiment of an extra-terrestrial visiting the world presented with the two kinds of men allowed to kill: the soldier and the executioner. Given that the former kills honest and good men and the latter kills criminals, the visitor will doubtless be surprised to discover the esteem exhibited for the warrior and the ignominy of the executioner.[15] "Il est défendu de tuer; tout meurtrier est puni, à moins qu'il n'ait tué en grande compagnie, et au son des trompettes." (It is forbidden to kill; therefore all murderers are punished unless they kill in large numbers and to the sound of trumpets.)[16] Maistre uses the example of war to attack materialistic theories of human behaviour such as 'God is always on the side of the big battalions.' On the contrary, here laws of physical force are often quite impotent: "C'est l'imagination qui gagne et qui perd les batailles." (It is imagination that wins or loses battles.)[17] In such passages Maistre is attacking the crude mechanical anthropology employed by prominent philosophes like La Mettrie or D'Alembert. The violence of warfare is grounded in man's (ambivalent) spiritual nature and resists mechanical explanation. Moreover, notwithstanding its real horrors, war generates much that is positive for human life: it is a dreadful "scourge" and yet "the *real* fruits of human nature—arts, sciences, great enterprises, noble ideas, manly virtues—are due especially to the art of war."[18]

Closely linked to this doctrine is his resolute innatism or "original notions common to all men, without which they would not be men."[19] Through these innate ideas men can interpret the visible world as the symbolic juncture between the temporal and the divine. I was lately told a tale of a small terrier in rural England, one that was uncommonly fond of a cat in the same household. When the cat died, the tiny dog went into the garden, dug up the corpse of the cat, dragged it through the cat flap and licked it clean for the owner, who found his cat thus 'resurrected' when he arose the next morning. The dog's devotion to his feline companion is startling and touching, but one is reminded of Vico's thoughts about the uniqueness of burials for human beings.[20] Maistre makes a rather similar point when he describes an execution with his dog and he describes the very different world of the dog. He and the dog have the same phenomenal experiences but dwell in different worlds. The dog can sense the crowd

[15]Maistre, *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*, 650.

[16]Voltaire, *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*, "Rights" (1771).

[17]Maistre, *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*, 665.

[18]Maistre, *Considerations*, 29.

[19]*St Petersburg*, 234.

[20]Vico, *The New Science*, trans. D. Marsh (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999), §130.

or the action of the guillotine but has no conceptual or symbolic *awareness* of the cessation of a human life or the execution of justice; these are ideas and symbols beyond his ken.[21] The dog and his master have different perceptions of the world, different inputs. Bradley claims that Maistre "was among the first . . . to thematize how power . . . is based not merely on coercion but also, and even more fundamentally, on the symbolic, on custom, representation, and belief."[22] This emphasis upon the figurative is essential for Maistre: the physical world is a set of signs or Divine language: all things are suffused by the Divine and the whole cosmos points back to its creator. God is not a superfluous addition to the world, but the transcendent and sustaining source of its meaning. Thus even the horrors of war or execution are not strictly 'natural.' The distinctly human sense of cruelty and disorder in warfare and the terror of violent punishment presuppose a realm of transcendent meaning utterly removed from the sensorium of the brute. War and punishment fill the heart with dreadful awe and terror—yet not because mankind is thereby unveiled a wolf unto to itself ('homo homini lupus est' in Hobbes's invocation of the adage of Plautus in his *De cive* of 1651), but precisely, as Seneca said, because man is a thing sacred to man (homo sacra res homini).[23]

Religion and Sacrifice

In Maistre's political and social reflections, the Age of Enlightenment is depicted as an age of violent crisis. The seventeenth century represents, by contrast, a period of relative tranquility—the age of stability based upon a culture of willing Christian self-sacrifice. That stable epoch is ravaged and destroyed by the eighteenth century—an age of abstraction, of individualistic, critical reason, corroding the traditions of past centuries without replacing them. Within the framework of Maistre's historiography, the recent age of secular destruction, with the unleashing of the passions under the violent impulses of the selfish part of the soul, was the age when "the holy laws of humanity were struck down, innocent blood covering the scaffolds that covered France; men frying and powdering bloody heads, and even the mouths of women stained with human blood."[24] Far from glorifying violence, Maistre is producing an unflinching protocol of its baneful presence in the world. According to Maistre, it is not religion that is the cause of conflict but rather mankind's fallen nature, and sacrifice is the attempt to stem it. Suffering is purgative as well as punitive. Humanity's fallen nature can be expiated only by sacrifice, which is *vicaria anima*, a substitute soul. Maistre sees instances of this practice throughout the heathen world. Ancient pagans did not sacrifice wild or useless animals. But

---

[21]Maistre, *St Petersburg*, 131.

[22]Owen Bradley, *A Modern Maistre* (Nebraska: The University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 91.

[23]Seneca, *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium* XCV, 33.

[24]Maistre, *Elucidation on Sacrifices*, 371.

> the most precious for their utility were chosen, the most gentle, the most innocent, the ones closest to man by their instincts and habits . . . the most human victims, if one may express oneself in this way. Before Christ a sacrificial victim was anthropomorphic. After Christ, the paradigmatically human is the willing self-sacrifice. Christianity is distinctive because for it sacrifice is ethical, as self-renunciation. The Christian aims to be Christ-like in self abnegation: "under the empire of this divine law, the just man (who never believes himself to be such) nevertheless tries to come up to his model through suffering. He examines himself, he purifies himself, he works on himself with efforts that seem to surpass humanity to obtain finally the grace of being able to return what has not be stolen."[25]

One might fruitfully consider Glaucon's claim in Plato's *Republic* that the righteous man will be humiliated and tortured, bound, blinded and crucified:

> They will say that the just man, as we have pictured him, will be scourged, tortured, and imprisoned, his eyes will be put out, and after enduring every humiliation he will be crucified, and learn at last that one should want not to be, but to seem just.[26]

Kant shares this perception of suffering: "the sublimity and inner worth of the command is the more manifest in a duty, the fewer are the subjective causes for obeying it and the more there are against."[27] Thus virtue "reveals itself most splendidly in suffering."[28] In the *Religion* Kant is explicit:

> The emergence from the corrupted disposition into the good is in itself already sacrifice (as 'the death of the old man' 'the crucifying of the flesh') and the entrance into a long train of life's ills which the new human being undertakes in the disposition of the Son of God.[29]

Maistre is much less coy that Kant about the theological dimension of his philosophy of suffering, of *régénération dans le sang.* And Maistre is more inclined to provoke and shock. But the ethics of both philosophers is shaped by an anthropology of emotions in an asymmetrical, even agonistic, relationship with reason.

Reason and Passions

A modern adherent of the Enlightenment tradition, Simon Blackburn in his book *Ruling Passions* attacks the rationalist tradition from Plato to Kant. I wish to argue that Maistre represents an even more radical version of Blackburn's rationalist target than Kant. My aim is to argue that, far from being an irrationalist, Maistre resembles an extreme instance of

---

[25]Maistre, *Dialogues*, 381–382.

[26]Plato, *The Republic*, trans. D Lee (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), 49 (362a).

[27]Kant, *The Moral Law*, ed. H. J. Paton (London: Hutchinson, 1981), 88.

[28]Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, V 156, ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), 129.

[29]Kant, *Religion* 6:74, trans. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), 90.

rationalism. This, I further claim, can be traced to Maistre's particular devotion to the thought of the great Alexandrian divine Origen.

Simon Blackburn is a contemporary philosopher who rightly sees ethics as presupposing a particular ideal of human nature and agency. In particular, Blackburn attacks the view implicit in Plato and Kant and radicalised in Maistre, that morality is at war with our passions. Blackburn rather wishes to see morality as the upshot of our passions. Blackburn deploys the Platonic image of the self as a ship from the Republic 488a-c. He employs his image to attack a Platonic-Kantian version of the core self as the controlling rational part. This, the 'spurious figure of the Kantian captain' according to Blackburn, is a patriarchal authoritarian phantasy. To this he opposes a variant of Hume's bundle – the self as a network of forces, of which reason is only a part. On this model, the crew members correspond to distinct forces within the self, and these forces will come into conflict:

> After one voice has prevailed, various things may happen to the losers: they may be thrown overboard and lost altogether, or more likely they may remain silenced just for the occasion, or they may remain sullen and mutinous, or they may continue to have at least some affect on the ship's course.[30]

For Blackburn, the image of the ship represents the image of mutual co-operation. Reason is only a part of a web of or network of impulses, desires and values. Its function, for Blackburn, is that of selection of input. Reason is like the lookout situation in the crow's nest which can view and examine the world and then relay the information to the rest of the crew. But reason cannot, nor should exercise pure hegemony. The input selected by reason is shaped by pre-existing appetites and inclinations. Thus the relation between reason and the passions is one of mutual determination. In terms of the metaphor, the 'ship' of the agent will only function properly through co-operation of the sundry members of the crew.

The mistake of the Kantian model of the self is placing the passions in an asymmetrical relationship with reason. The captain of the 'Kantian' ship does not engage with a fractious crew but determines them as a principle of rational hegemony. Unlike the Humean model, where the person is represented by the totality of the crew, for Kant the true self is the captain of the ship as pure practical reason and pure freedom. The agent is heteronomous when determined by the passions, that is, within the imagery of the ship, individual members of the crew.

Blackburn's imaginative employment of the ship metaphor neatly captures the opposition between the retrieval of the passions characteristic of many Enlightenment philosophers like Hume or Adam Smith and the Platonic-Kantian principle that reason should exert authority over other (inferior) aspects of the self; the position which Blackburn attacks as the bogus captain of the rationalists. Maistre radicalises precisely this rationalist model through the vision of humanity as a 'monstrous centaur'. The

[30]Simon Blackburn, *Ruling Passions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 245.

rhetorical gloominess of this language should not deflect from the 'rationalistic' stamp of Maistre's mind. Rather than being constituted by web of mutually reinforcing parts (Hume or Blackburn), the agent is determined by the agonistic asymmetry of reason and the passions.

Blackburn's cardinal objection to the rationalist model is that it erroneously divides the subordinate elements of the self from the ruling principle. He writes:

> Making desires the *object* of deliberation, rather than features of the person determining the selection and weighing of external features, inevitably leads to postulating an inner deliberator. This is a noumenal, transcendental, self whose relationship to desire is uncannily like my relationship to the world, yet mysteriously unlike it in not itself needing second-order desires to drive it.[31]

Blackburn, of course, wants to view desires as, at the very least, just as an essential part of the self as reason. Yet in dividing the passions from the rational self, Blackburn accuses Kant of estranging a good part of the self. Maistre would counter that the self *is* divided and alienated from itself. This is the testimony of Scripture and the greatest ancient philosophers and we see it in the cruelty and brutality of history and politics. On Maistre's view the self is alienated from it own core. Duplicity is an unavoidable dimension of the human condition, a state known to the ancient pagans:

> Plato tells us that in contemplating himself, he does not know if he sees a monster more duplicitous and more evil than Typhon, or rather a moral, gentle, and benevolent being who partakes in the nature of divinity. He adds that man, so torn in opposite directions, cannot act well or live happily without reducing to servitude that power of the soul in which evil resides, and without setting free that which is the home and the agent of virtue. This is precisely the Christian doctrine, and one could not confess more clearly the doctrine of original sin.[32]

The violence and suffering of the world must be understood from the perspective of the divided self: man is "the monstrous centaur," part steeped in violence and terrible crimes, and yet capable of love and compassion. Any society, like Revolutionary France and its totalitarian descendents in twentieth century Europe, that loses the sense of mankind's divided being and its violent passions, will be apt to unleash terrible suffering.

Origen Redivivus

Maistre's theory of sacrifice—*Régénération dans le sang*—presupposes a traditional dichotomy of the rational self and its passions and the objectivity of morality. Commentators sometimes refer to his Augustinianism, but Maistre is strangely reticent about the African doctor and enthusiastic about the Alexandrian divine, Origen (185–254), the doctor of universal

[31]Ibid, 255.

[32]Maistre, *St Petersburg*, 38.

salvation, whose speculations about the cosmic process through which all things descended from an initial unity in God and the process that produces a final return to unity. This is Origen's treatise *On Principles*, which develops the idea of restitution of all to the Divine source (*apokatastasis panton*, *restitutio universalis*). This universalistic doctrine is the opposite of double predestination and Augustine's grim doctrine of the *massa damnata*. Let us reflect again upon the famous lines about the earth as an altar:

> The entire earth, perpetually steeped in blood, is nothing but an immense altar on which every living thing must be immolated without end, without restraint, without respite, until the consummation of the world, until the extinction of evil, until the death of death.[33]

The reference to the "consummation of the world, until the extinction of evil, until the death of death" is an allusion to the *apokatastasis panton.* Like Descartes, Maistre was trained by the Jesuits and developed a loathing for the Augustinian Jansenists, whom he saw as proto-Protestants or philosophes. Maistre presents an Origenist vision of a fallen mankind: "every man as man is subject to all the misfortunes of humanity: the law is general, so it is not unjust. To claim a man's rank or virtues should exempt him from the actions of an iniquitous . . . tribunal is precisely the same as wanting such honours to exempt him from apoplexy, for example or even death."[34] It is original sin, viewed as cosmic fall, that determines the existence of suffering, death and evil. But all mankind is suffering and will be redeemed through Christ: "the blood that was shed on the calvary was not only useful to men, but to the angels, to the stars, and all other created beings."[35]

Maistre sees Empiricism, i.e., a sensualistic epistemology, as the core error of the French Enlightenment. For Maistre this means an unacceptable rejection of the classic Platonic-Aristotelian-Christian identification of the rational self or soul as the divine component of a composite human being and its replacement with a naturalistic theory of human cognition and action. 'Know Thyself' for Plato, Aristotle or the Christian humanists like Justin, Clement or Origen, meant "Know thy Divine self.' The 'odious Hume,' as Maistre calls him, and the celebrated authors of the radical French Enlightenment, were engaged in the attempt to dismantle this tenet. It should be noted that this construal of the Delphic Oracle is not triumphalistic in Maistre. It has its epistemic dimension: he admired and supported the innatism of the Cambridge Platonists against Locke. But it is the basis of terrible tension in human nature that requires expiation through sacrifice:

> [Man] *gravitates* . . . toward the regions of light. No beaver, no swallow, no bee wants to know more than its predecessors. All beings are calm in the place they occupy. All are degraded, but they do not know it; man alone has the feeling of it, and that feeling is at once the proof of his grandeur and

[33]Ibid., 217

[34]Ibid., 16.

[35]Maistre, *Elucidation on Sacrifices*, 382.

> of his misery, of his sublime rights and of his incredible degradation. In the state to which he is reduced, he does not even have the sad happiness of ignoring himself: he must contemplate himself without cease, and he cannot contemplate himself without blushing; his very greatness humiliates him, since the lights that elevate him toward the angels serve only to show him the abominable tendencies within him that degrade him toward the beast. He looks in the depths of his being for some healthy part without being able to find it: evil has soiled everything, *and man entire is nothing but a malady*.[36]

But Maistre avoids the Manichaean tendency of Augustine. Thus Origen rejects not only the literal narrative of the Fall of Adam and Eve in the garden, but also the Augustinian idea of a collective fall in Adam. Grace must not impede freedom and God cannot be confused with any arbitrary power. Quoting Origen, Maistre states,

> Those who have adopted it, do not think the words of the apostle *the flesh lusts against the spirit* (Galatians 5:17) should be taken to mean the flesh properly speaking, but to this soul, which is really *the soul of the flesh*: for, they say, we have two souls, the one good and heavenly, the other inferior and terrestrial: it is of the latter that it has been said *that its works are manifest*, and we believe that this soul of the flesh resides in the blood.[37]

Maistre insists that evil is tied to human free will but it is also through free will that mankind returns to God. Mankind is like a "tree that an invisible hand is pruning, often to its benefit."[38] The cosmic and historic process of return to primeval unity is really a divine education of mankind. Faced with the question, why is human life marked by so much inequality and suffering, Maistre wishes to claim, like Origen, that God is not to blame for evils and injustice by appeal to a fall of each soul into the world: "it is man who is charged with slaughtering man."[39] The apparently pathological interest in violence and suffering in Maistre is linked to his Origenistic desire to avoid a tyrannical deity who has preordained misery in his inscrutable will. The suffering of humanity is the price to be paid for preserving an arena of genuine freedom: such is the *loi d'amour* ('law of love') that entails the making inward of sacrifice, the ethical submission to goodness and spirit.[40] Here is the liberal humanist theologian in Maistre, so indebted to Origen. Ironically, the Maistre who was identified by Isaiah Berlin as the political theorist at the origins of modern irrationalism emphasises the dark and cruel dimension of human experience *in order to avoid* an irrationalist and voluntarist theology that rests upon the twin doctrines of human depravity and inscrutable and arbitrary divine will.

University of Cambridge

---

[36]Ibid.,43.

[37]Maistre, *St Petersburg*, 355.

[38]Maistre, *Considerations*, 28.

[39]Maistre, *St Petersburg*, 217.

[40]Ibid., 371.