

## A Thoughtful Call for Higher Moral Standards, Courtesy of *Playboy* Magazine

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“I have sinned in my heart.”

I only recently discovered that I had been consistently misquoting Jimmy Carter in the course of casual conversations sprinkled throughout the past half of a decade—a horrible thought to someone who should pay attention to such niceties as accuracy in reporting. It is my duty, therefore, to note that contrary to popular belief, during the-now-momentous interview in 1976 with *Playboy*, Carter did not say (as often parodied) “I have sinned in my heart.” He said: “I’ve committed adultery in my heart many times” (Gil, 2001).

This confession was shocking at the time for a few key reasons. First, Jimmy Carter stated that lust was a sin during an interview for a publication whose driving economic impetus is that very vice which Carter condemned. Second, in November 1976, when the article came out, Carter was in a precarious and powerful position as President-elect, and so he knew that, as the next Commander-in-Chief, he was already setting a moral example for Americans who were most likely interested in hearing what he had to say.

In bringing up a spiritual position in an interview with the quite secular *Playboy*, Carter must have known that he would risk being ridiculed and might potentially alienate readers. This is the position in which the average college student may find himself or herself, attempting to navigate an at least nominally secular campus while maintaining some interest in spiritual guidelines. Indeed, every conversation of ethics seems to lead to a period of defining terms such as “ethic,” “religious,” and “moral.” Are they related? Are they even worth discussing when so many people have found their own personal paths?

And one might ask, more directly—just how does Jimmy Carter’s personal confession of thought-based sin made in 1976 apply to college students today? Does thought carry the same power of the potential to sin which some ascribe to action? Is there any such thing as sin? Who among us is without “sin,” if it exists? (Note the plethora of questions, ranging from basic to rather philosophical. This sounds like a college campus.) “And if indeed one might sin, how can Jimmy Carter be certain that he is in fact sinning?” These questions can be posed from an academic standpoint from here until the audience is driven mad by a world of indeterminism. This is what academia, in its best and worst extremities, creates: students are encouraged (rather forcefully) to examine issues from multiple angles; they are also prevented from drawing absolute truths out of a situation.

However, this moral ambiguity does not mean that there is no system of correction in place—there are some behaviors which will not be tolerated within the university system.

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Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty form the bulk of student sanctions. At UCLA, we have also had a few large-scale scandals such as questions of misappropriations of funding by elected student officials or of unfair admissions policies. But to my knowledge, it is rare for someone to sit down candidly with *The Daily Bruin* and say, “I have sinned,” let alone “I have sinned in my heart.” I wonder whether the *Bruin* would run either statement with such direct reference to Judeo-Christian principles. Generally, if we even bother to admit a mistake or a moral error, we say, “I screwed up,” and only sometimes do those we are addressing actually receive an “I’m sorry” after that.

Back to poor Jimmy Carter, the much-lambasted, perhaps overly honest peanut farmer and thirty-ninth president of these great United States . . . whether one appreciated Carter’s governmental policies, it would be difficult not to admire his sincerity and high standards. For Jimmy Carter, sinning in his heart (not his technical words, yes, but the same sentiment) was tantamount to sinning in deed, both requiring contemplation and subsequent repentance. Whether a student believes in “sin” or in another notion of incorrect versus correct behavior, the majority of us understand that a relationship exists between action and consequence; we may be held responsible for an action which produces a socially inappropriate result.

Swaddled in the culturally diverse fabric of UCLA, it makes little sense for me to demand that everyone adopt the same meaning of “sin” that I have, a meaning I take from my religion. What I can ask, however, is that my peers acknowledge that THOUGHTS are the root of action, and thus should be examined internally for potential consequences just as our conduct is examined externally by other people. Let me illustrate my point with what may seem to be a rather trivial example.

After a long and frustrating day of classes, attending meetings, running errands, returning library books, or any long list of tasks which seem to spring up and accumulate at an ever-increasing rate, you remember that you promised to photocopy your Latin notes for a disabled student. Now, this arrangement is official, through a department on campus which serves disabled students and pays you a small stipend to prepare the notes. Your friend intercepts you on the way to the office and begs you for a copy of your physics notes because she missed class for (insert reason for absence). “Sure,” you say, and you rush off. Arriving at the office of disabled students, you begin to reproduce the assignment using *their* photocopy machine. Suddenly you remember that your commitment to your friend entitles you to the pleasure of either hand-copying your notes (think chisel-on-papyrus) or paying to have the notes scanned somewhere on campus . . . or . . . or you could copy the notes right there, just a few extra pages in addition to your Latin notes. It would be easy, and your stipend is so small, and the toner for a few pages is hardly worth the hassle of having to walk all around campus to find a copy machine for hire or the hour to rewrite the notes.

Welcome to Mr. Carter’s world. You, my friend, have just sinned in your heart. You are engaging in the business most commonly associated with a poor moral decision—rationalization, which is a purely mental set of gymnastics designed to quell that gut feeling which tells you that yes, that copy machine is tempting, but off-limits, because all of its inky glory was purchased solely and expressly for the reproduction of notes for disabled students. (That gut feeling is often referred to as “conscience,” which luckily for all, has both religious and secular connotations.)

I cannot tell you how many notes I have reproduced in my mind, how many sins I have made in my heart. I may tell you that the more times you reproduce those thoughts in your mind, those excuses, those “why nots,” the more likely you will put the illicit paper to glass, press a button, and decisively sin in action as well.

“So, I used the photocopy machine for personal copies. Next you’ll tell me that I shouldn’t surf the web or take a peek at my e-mail during work!” Impossible, you scoff. Almost as impossible as Jimmy Carter attempting not to commit adultery in his heart when associating

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with *Playboy*? The point that Jimmy Carter was making was less about his particular imperfections and moral failures, although that confessional aspect is important. He was talking about recognizing the universal shortcoming of human beings to rationalize what they are doing by imposing what he called a “relative degree of sinfulness” which made their own actions look comparatively excusable. Taking a hard line about unethical and immoral behavior, he makes thought equally powerful in the sinning process. Jimmy Carter stated quite clearly in the interview that he knows no one (least of all himself) who would be able to measure up to the standards he wished to promote, but that the greatest good is in adopting them nonetheless and in attempting to make moral decisions. There is reason to believe that you’ll still surf the Web at work, but rather than just accepting it as your right, you will be aware of the mental process which rationalized the action. If you’re attuned to little pangs of conscience, the theory goes, you will be more likely to react strongly to the large pangs which signal an impending error of proportionate magnitude.

Making decisions about what is right and wrong is difficult even when the discussion is purely internal. When debating about ethics with a friend or colleague, the stakes are much higher because of the potential to offend or annoy. It is in these conversations, as well as within internal dialogue, that I strive to remember Jimmy Carter’s wisdom in recognizing that thoughts lead to action and his courage in saying so in a national magazine regardless of the censure or parodies that might ensue.

Even in writing this article or in engaging in discussions about ethical activity, I find myself more sensitive to the part of me which so desperately wants to use the off-limits photocopier to save time and energy. Maybe what I’m saying seems overly picky, unimportant, or even laughable because of the minuteness of the ethical decisions involved. But that, to Jimmy Carter, and to me, is probably a good indication that we’re doing something right, or that we’re at least on the right track to recognizing and thwarting inappropriate behaviors.

### References

- Gil, T. (2001). *Jimmy Carter The Playboy Interview- Excerpt*. Retrieved March 18, 2009, from Hist. 103- The History of the American Presidency. Web site: <http://www.arts.mcgill.ca/history/faculty/TROYWEB/Courseweb/JimmyCarterThePlayboyInterview.htm>
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