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Topic 27: Morality of Human Acts

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1. The Morality of Human Acts

“Human acts, that is, acts that are freely chosen in consequence of a judgment of conscience, can be morally evaluated. They are either good or evil” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1749).

“Acting is morally good when the choices of freedom are *in conformity with man’s true good* and thus express the voluntary ordering of the person towards our ultimate end: God himself.”[1]

The morality of human acts depends on:

— the object chosen;

— the end sought or the intention;

— the circumstances of the action.

“The object, the intention, and the circumstances make up the ‘sources,’ or constitutive elements, of the

morality of human acts" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1750).

2. The Moral Object

"*The morality of the human act depends primarily and fundamentally on the 'object' rationally chosen by the deliberate will,* as is borne out by the insightful analysis, still valid today, made by Saint Thomas."[2] The moral value of human acts (whether they are good or evil) depends above all on the conformity of the object or act that is willed with the good of the person according to right reason. "The reason why a good intention is not itself sufficient, but a correct choice of actions is also needed, is that the human act depends on its object, whether that object is *capable or not of being ordered* to God, to the One who 'alone is good,' and thus brings about the perfection of the person."[3]

“Reason attests that there are objects of the human act which are by their nature ‘incapable of being ordered’ to God, because they radically contradict the good of the person made in his image. These are the acts which, in the Church’s moral tradition, have been termed ‘intrinsically evil’ (*intrinsece malum*): they are such *always and per se,* in other words, on account of their very object, and quite apart from the ulterior intentions of the one acting and the circumstances.”[4]

Consequentialism and p*roportionalism* are erroneous theories concerning the moral object of an action. “The former claims to draw the criteria of the rightness of a given way of acting solely from a calculation of foreseeable consequences deriving from a given choice. The latter, by weighing the various values and goods being sought, focuses rather on the

proportion acknowledged between the good and bad effects of that choice, with a view to the ‘greater good’ or ‘lesser evil’ actually possible in a particular situation.”[5]

3. Intention

In human actions “the end is the first goal of the intention and indicates the purpose pursued in the action. The intention is a movement of the will toward the end: it is concerned with the goal of the activity” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1752).[6] An act that “can be offered to God according to its object, is also *capable of being ordered* to its ultimate end. That same act then attains its ultimate and decisive perfection when the will *actually does order* it to God.”[7] The intention of the person acting “is an element essential to the moral evaluation of an action” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1752).

“Intention is not limited to directing individual actions, but can guide several actions toward one and the same purpose; it can orient one’s whole life toward its ultimate end . . . One and the same action can also be inspired by several intentions” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1752).

“A good intention does not make behavior that is intrinsically disordered, such as lying and calumny, good or just. The end does not justify the means” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1753).[8] “On the other hand, an added bad intention (such as vainglory) makes an act evil that, in and of itself, can be good (such as almsgiving; cf *Mt* 6:2-4)” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1753).

4. Circumstances

Circumstances “are secondary elements of a moral act. They

contribute to increasing or diminishing the moral goodness or evil of human acts (for example, the amount of a theft). They can also diminish or increase the agent's responsibility (such as acting out of a fear of death)" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1754). Circumstances "of themselves cannot change the moral quality of acts themselves; they can make neither good nor right an action that is in itself evil" (*Ibid.*).

"A morally good act requires the goodness of the object, of the end, and of the circumstances together" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1755).[9]

5. Indirect Voluntary Actions

"An action can be indirectly voluntary when it results from negligence regarding something one should have known or

done” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1736).[10]

“An effect can be tolerated without being willed by its agent; for instance, a mother’s exhaustion from tending her sick child. A bad effect is not imputable if it was not willed either as an end or as a means of an action, e.g., a death a person incurs in aiding someone in danger. For a bad effect to be imputable it must be foreseeable and the agent must have the possibility of avoiding it, as in the case of manslaughter caused by a drunken driver” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1737).

An effect can be said to be “willed indirectly” when it is not willed either as an end or a means for anything else, but it is something that necessarily accompanies the desired action.[11] This is important in the moral life, because at times actions can have two effects, one good and

another bad, and it may be licit to carry them out in order to obtain the good effect (willed directly), even though the evil one cannot be avoided (which, therefore, is willed only indirectly). These situations at times require great moral discernment, where prudence dictates seeking advice from someone able to give sound guidance.

An act is voluntary (and thus blameworthy) *in causa* when, though not chosen for itself, it frequently follows a directly willed action. For example, a person who fails to keep proper custody of the eyes before obscene images is responsible (because it has been willed *in causa*) for the disorder (not directly chosen) in one's imagination.

6. Responsibility

"Freedom makes man responsible for his acts to the extent that they are

voluntary" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1734). The exercise of freedom always brings with it responsibility before God: in every free act we either accept or reject God's will.

"Imputability and responsibility for an action can be diminished or even nullified by ignorance, inadvertence, duress, fear, habit, inordinate attachments, and other psychological or social factors" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1735).

7. Merit

"The term 'merit' refers in general to the recompense owed by a community or a society for the action of one of its members, experienced either as beneficial or harmful, deserving reward or punishment. Merit is relative to the virtue of justice, in conformity with the principle of equality which governs

it” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2006).

We have no strict right to any merit before God for our good works (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2007).[12] Nevertheless, “filial adoption, in making us partakers by grace in the divine nature, can bestow true merit on us as a result of God’s gratuitous justice. This is our right by grace, the full right of love, making us ‘co-heirs’ with Christ and worthy of obtaining the promised inheritance of eternal life” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2009).[13]

“The merit of man before God in the Christian life arises from the fact that God *has freely chosen to associate man with the work of his grace*” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2008).[14]

Francisco Diaz

Basic bibliography

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1749-1761.

John Paul II, Enc. *Veritatis splendor*, August 6, 1993, nos. 71-83.

Recommended readings

St. Josemaría, Homily, “Christian Respect for Persons and their Freedom,”*Christ Is Passing By*, 67-72.

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[1] John Paul II, Enc. *Veritatis splendor*, August 6, 1993, 72. “The first question in the young man’s conversation with Jesus: ‘What good must I do to have eternal life?’ (*Mt* 19:6) immediately brings out *the essential connection between the moral value of an act and man’s final end* . . . Jesus’ answer and his reference to the commandments also

make it clear that the path to that end is marked by respect for the divine laws which safeguard human good. *Only the act in conformity with the good can be a path that leads to life*" (*Ibid*.).

[2] John Paul II, Enc. *Veritatis splendor*, 78; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1751. "In order to be able to grasp the object of an act which specifies that act morally, it is therefore necessary to place oneself *in the perspective of the acting person*. The object of the act of willing is in fact a freely chosen kind of behavior. To the extent that it is in conformity with the order of reason, it is the cause of the goodness of the will; it perfects us morally, and disposes us to recognize our ultimate end in the perfect good, primordial love. By the object of a given moral act, then, one cannot mean a process or an event of the merely physical order, to be assessed on the basis of its ability to

bring about a given state of affairs in the outside world”(*Ibid.*). The “physical object” should not be confused with the “moral object” of the action (one and the same physical action may be the object of different moral acts, e.g., cutting with a scalpel may be a surgical operation or a homicide).

[3] John Paul II, Enc. *Veritatis splendor*, 78.

[4] *Ibid.* 80; Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1756. Vatican Council II specifies several examples: *attempts against human life*, such as “any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia or willful self-destruction, whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment,

deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where men are treated as mere tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others of their like are infamies indeed. They poison human society, but they do more harm to those who practice them than those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are supreme dishonor to the Creator" (Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes*, 27).

Paul VI, referring to contraceptive practices, taught that it is never licit "to intend directly something which of its very nature contradicts the moral order, and which must therefore be judged unworthy of man, even though the intention is to protect or promote the welfare of an individual, of a family or of society in general" (Paul VI, Enc. *Humanae vitae*, July 25, 1968, 14).

[5] John Paul II, Enc. *Veritatis splendor*, 75. This is not the same as saying that one may do evil in order to obtain a good end. For example, a proportionalist would not hold that one could carry out a swindle for a good aim, but rather would examine whether what is done is or is not a swindle (whether what is "objectively chosen" is a swindle or not) by taking into account all the circumstances and the intention. One could thus end up saying that what really is a swindle is not such given the circumstances and intention and could justify that action (or any other).

[6] The moral object refers to *what* the will wants to carry out with a specific action (for example, to kill a person, or to give alms), while intention refers to *why* he wills it (for example, to collect an inheritance, to look good before others, or to help someone who is poor).

[7] John Paul II, Enc. *Veritatis splendor*, 78.

[8] ”It frequently happens that a man acts with a good intention, but without any spiritual benefit because he lacks good will. For example, one commits a robbery to help the poor: in this case, even if on the inside his intention is good, he lacks rectitude of will because the acts are evil. In conclusion, a good intention does not authorize performing any evil work. ‘Some claim we say—that we should do evil that good may come of it? Their penalty is what they deserve’ (*Rom* 3:8)” (St. Thomas Aquinas, *In duo praecepta caritatis, Opuscula theologica II*, no. 1168).

[9] That is to say, for a free act to be ordered to our true ultimate end, it requires:

a) that in itself it be capable of being ordered to that end: that it be

objectively good, given the object of the moral act

b) that it be capable of being ordered to that end given the circumstances of place, time, etc. in which it is carried out.

c) that the will of the person acting effectively orders it to our true ultimate end: that it be subjectively good, by the *intention*.

[10] “For example, an accident arising from ignorance of traffic laws” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1736). When someone is ignorant of elementary traffic laws (voluntarily and culpably), the consequences of that ignorance can be said to be willed indirectly.

[11] For example, a person who takes a pill to cure a cold, knowing that it will bring on sleep; what is directly willed is to cure the cold, and indirectly sleep. Properly speaking,

the indirect effects of an action are not “willed,” but rather tolerated or permitted insofar as inevitably united to what one has to do.

[12] *Guilt* is the responsibility we take one before God when we sin, making us worthy of punishment.

[13] Cf. Council of Trent, DS 1546.

[14] When a Christian does good “the fatherly action of God is first on his own initiative, and then follows man’s free acting through his collaboration, so that the merit of good works is to be attributed in the first place to the grace of God, then to the faithful” *(Ibid.*).

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