Topic 26: The Morality of Human Actions

Only voluntary actions are the object of a moral evaluation properly speaking. The education of the complex world of feelings is a fundamental part of Christian formation and life. The path for ordering the passions is the acquisition of moral habits called virtues. The object, the intention and the circumstances are the “sources” or constitutive elements of the morality of human acts.

10/05/2022

Passions and actions

It is useful to first clarify the distinction between passions (also called feelings or emotions) and voluntary actions. Sometimes we are surprised by an unforeseen reaction to people, events or things: a movement of anger that comes unexpectedly at a word considered offensive; a spontaneous feeling of sadness and bewilderment at the unexpected death of a friend; a feeling of envy on seeing someone who possesses a valuable object. These psychic states which occur without our consent (to which we are, so to speak, passive subjects), are commonly called feelings or passions. But at other times we realize that we are active subjects of our actions, because we plan and

carry them out on our own initiative: we decide to start studying or to go visit a sick friend. The acts with which we stop or give free rein to our passions are also actions: when faced with an offensive word that arouses in us a movement of anger, we can remain silent with a smile; or we can respond to someone who treats us badly with another equally offensive word.

Only voluntary actions are subject to a true moral evaluation, i.e. only they can be a moral fault or a praiseworthy action. This does not mean, however, that feelings are neutral phenomena, nor that they are unimportant for Christian life. The passions presuppose a judgement on the person or thing before which they arise, and imply taking a stance and a course of action. In the face of a person or object regarded as good, a positive emotion arises (joy, enthusiasm),

suggesting a positive stance and course of action (approving, praising, approaching that person); in the face of a person or event regarded as bad, a negative passion arises (anger, sadness), suggesting a negative stance and course of action (disapproval, aggression). Generally speaking, we can say that passions arising from a true judgement and suggesting a good course of action are a help for the Christian life, because they allow a quick understanding of what is good and make it easy and pleasant to carry out the actions that are appropriate for a good child of God. Passions that presuppose a false judgement (e.g. because they see an offence where there is none) and suggest a morally negative stance and course of action (e.g. a lack of charity or violent behaviour) are a significant obstacle to the Christian life.

A person who experiences negative passions could nevertheless behave well, by resisting the passion and doing what is good with great effort. But it is easy to understand that one cannot go uphill all one's life, continually resisting the onslaught of bad passions, doing what one does not want to do and always rejecting what one's feelings and emotions incline one towards. If the inner world of feelings is not guided and educated, it will be difficult to discern what is good, because the negative passions darken the mind, and one will often yield to them and do wrong, and the continual struggle may well lead to discouragement or exhaustion.

Therefore the education of the complex world of our feelings is a key part of Christian formation and life. To educate means to shape, to give a good and Christian form to the world of our feelings, so that feelings

that arise spontaneously in us help us to discern and to do good quickly, accurately and pleasantly. The means for ordering the passions is the acquisition of good moral habits or virtues (prudence, justice, temperance, etc.), which modify the tendencies at the root of the passions. The feelings ordered by virtue lead us to like to do what is good; what we feel like doing and what God expects of us almost always coincide. We say “almost always” because the disorder resulting from original sin does not always allow for perfect order. Even the most saintly people sometimes get more angry than they should.

For the study of the morality of human acts it is important to bear in mind what has just been said about passions and feelings, because many of our voluntary actions are motivated by passions and feelings; these actions are our way of reacting

to or governing the passions we experience. For example, we couldn't properly evaluate a person's uncharitable words towards another person if we didn't know that the former had been seriously offended by the latter, and that he had to struggle hard not to escalate to physical aggression, and that the uncharitable words he has uttered basically express a fairly good, though not perfect, self-control. The fact that a person suffering from a feeling of apathy fails to apply himself to his studies is less bad morally than if the negligence were the result of voluntary disinterest. With our voluntary actions, which we will consider below, we are often governing the passage into the realm of freedom of movements and solicitations arising from the involuntary world of our feelings.

Morality of human actions

As was said above, only voluntary actions (also called human acts) are properly moral actions, good or bad. Catholic moral doctrine teaches that "the morality of human acts depends on:

- the object chosen;

- the end in view 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*, 1750).

We will look more closely at these three elements of our actions below.

The moral object

The moral object "is the proximate end of a deliberate decision which determines the act of willing on the part of the acting person."[1] We will first consider what the object of an action is, and then what the moral object is.

Actions are defined and distinguished from one another by their object. But here "object" refers to the immediate content of a voluntary action, i.e. to what is immediately intended by the act of the will, and not to the external thing. For example: if John buys a book, the object of John's will (what he wants to do) is "to buy a book," and not the book; if Peter steals a book, the object of Peter's will is "to steal a book," and not the book. If the book were the object of both actions, we would have to accept the false thesis that "buying a book" and

“stealing a book” are identical actions, since both would have the same object.

To highlight the need to pay attention to what the subject intends to do, Saint John Paul II wrote that in order to know what the moral object of an act is “it is therefore necessary to place oneself in the perspective of the acting person . . . 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.”[2]

The expression “moral object” means that the object of the will is related to virtues and vices. “Buying a book” is a good object, while “stealing a book” is a bad object, because the former is in conformity with the virtue of justice, while the latter is opposed to that virtue.

Catholic doctrine holds that the moral value of human acts (whether they are good or evil) depends above all and fundamentally on the positive or negative value of the moral object, [3] that is, on the conformity of the object or the desired act with right reason, the fundamental principles of which are the virtues. Acts which by their object are opposed to the essential requirements of the virtues (justice, temperance, etc.) are *intrinsically evil*, i.e. they are evil "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] For example, adultery, abortion and theft are intrinsically evil.

Proportionalism and consequentialism are erroneous theories on the formation of the moral object of an action, according to which the moral object is

determined on the basis of the "proportion" between the goods and evils that are sought, or the "consequences" that may follow.[5]

Intention

While the moral object refers to what the will wants with a specific act (e.g. to buy a book), the intention refers to why this is wanted (e.g. to prepare for an exam, to make a gift). The intention implies that what the will wants cannot be obtained immediately, but only through other actions. Wanting to give a book as a gift is an intention if, in order to give the book as a gift, other actions must first be chosen: buying the book, going to the house of the person to whom the gift is to be given, etc.

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."[6] In human behaviour there is usually a series of ends subordinated one to the other: we want a book to prepare for an exam; we take the exam to obtain a professional degree; we want that degree in order to earn a good salary and to carry out a useful job for society, and so on. In the end, in every behaviour, there is an ultimate goal that is desired for its own sake and not for the sake of something else, which should be God, but which can also be vainglory, the desire for power or riches, etc. Therefore an act which, because of its object, is "ordainable" to God, "attains its ultimate and decisive perfection when the will actually does order it to God through charity."[7]

Intention, like any other act of the will, can be morally good or bad. If it is good, it can confirm or even increase the goodness that an action

has because of its object. But a “good intention (for example, that of helping one's neighbor) does not make behavior that is intrinsically disordered . . . good or just. The end does not justify the means.”[8] If the intention is evil, it can confirm or increase the malice that the act has by virtue of its moral object. And it could also make an act evil that by its object is good, as would happen when someone begins to treat another person benevolently for the sole purpose of corrupting him later on.[9]

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).”[10] Circumstances “can make neither good nor right an action that is in itself evil.”[11] There are circumstances that can add a new reason for evil to an act, as in the case of an impure act committed by a person who has a vow of chastity. Circumstances of this kind must be declared in the sacrament of confession.

Hence, in summary, “a morally good act requires the goodness of the object, of the end, and of the circumstances together.”[12]

The indirect object of the will

An indirect object of the will is a consequence of the action (a collateral effect) that is neither of interest nor desired in any way, either as an end or as a means, but is foreseen and permitted insofar as it is inevitably linked to what is desired. Thus, for example, a person

undergoes a cure for leukaemia which causes, as a side effect, baldness; a woman who would like to start a family allows her uterus to be removed, in which a serious malignant tumour has developed that cannot be treated by other means, and as a consequence she becomes sterile. Baldness and sterility are indirect objects of the will, not wanted, but known and foreseen side effects that one is forced by necessity to accept. When an action has a negative indirect effect on oneself or on others, the problem of its moral lawfulness arises. Thus St. Paul teaches that certain actions are to be avoided which, while in themselves lawful, have the collateral or indirect effect of scandalising those who are weak in the faith.[13]

This is important in the moral life, because it sometimes happens that there are actions which have two

effects (actions of double effect), one good and the other evil, and it can be licit to do them in order to obtain the good effect (directly desired), even if the evil one cannot be avoided (which, therefore, is desired only indirectly). These are sometimes very delicate situations, in which it is prudent to seek advice from those who can give it.

We list below some conditions that must be observed – all together – for it to be lawful to perform (or else omit) an action when it also causes a negative effect. These conditions are:

1) The act performed must in itself be good, or at least indifferent.

2) The good effect must not be achieved through the bad: evil cannot be done in order to bring about good. If the desired good comes from evil, the latter is no longer “indirectly voluntary,” but directly willed as a means.

3) The person must directly seek the good effect (i.e. have a right intention), and be forced to accept the evil effect. Hence that person will make every effort to avoid, or at least to limit, the latter.

4) There must be proportionality between the good that is sought and the evil that is tolerated: it is not morally justified to risk one's own life in order to earn a few dollars, or to endanger a pregnancy by taking a medicine in order to avoid some slight inconvenience. Proportionality requires that the good effect be all the more important depending on: a) the more serious is the evil that is tolerated; b) the greater the proximity between the act performed and the production of the evil: investing one's savings in a publishing house that has many immoral publications differs morally from investing them in a bank that controls part of the publishing house;

c) the greater the certainty that the evil effect will be produced: for example, selling alcohol to an alcoholic; d) the greater the obligation to prevent the evil: for example, when a civil or ecclesiastical authority is involved.

Moral imputability

An act is morally imputable to the person who performs it to the exact extent that the act is voluntary.[14] "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."[15] Passions, too, if strong, can diminish the imputability of the act, and in extreme cases (strong panic in the face of an earthquake) could suppress it altogether.

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.”[16]

In absolute terms no one can claim any right or merit before God.[17] However, by virtue of God’s plan to associate us with the working of his grace,[18] a person who performs good works while in God’s grace can receive “true merit . . . 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.’”[19]

As to what we can merit, it is worth bearing in mind that “no one can merit the initial grace of forgiveness and justification, at the beginning of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, we can then merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and for the attainment of eternal life. Even temporal goods like health and friendship can be merited in accordance with God's wisdom. These graces and goods are the object of Christian prayer. Prayer attends to the grace we need for meritorious actions.”[20]

Basic bibliography

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1749-1761.

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

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[1] Saint John Paul II, *Veritatis splendor*, 78. Cf. *Catechism*, 1751.

[2] Saint John Paul II, *Veritatis splendor*, 78.

[3] "The morality of the human act depends above all and fundamentally on the object rationally chosen by the deliberate will" (Saint John Paul II, *Veritatis splendor*, 78).

[4] *Ibid.*, 80; cf. *Catechism*, 1756.

[5] These theories do not claim that "an evil can be done in order to obtain a good," but that it cannot be said that some behaviour is always evil, because it depends in each case on the "proportion" between good

and evil, or on the "consequences" (cf. Saint John Paul II, *Veritatis splendor*, 75). For example, a proportionalist would not hold that "it is morally licit to defraud someone for a good end," but would examine whether or not what is done is fraudulent (whether or not what is "objectively chosen" is a fraud) taking into account all the circumstances, and the intention. In the end what is in fact a fraud could be said to not be one, which could justify that action (or any other).

[6] *Catechism*, 1752.

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

[8] *Catechism*, 1753. "It often happens that a person acts with a good intention but without spiritual profit because he lacks good will. For example, one steals to help the poor: in this case, although the intention is good, the uprightness of the will is

lacking because the deeds are evil. In conclusion, a good intention does not authorise one to do any evil deed. *Some say: Let us do evil so that good may come. These deserve their own condemnation* (Rom 3:8)" (Saint Thomas Aquinas, *In duo praecepta caritatis: Opuscula theologica*, II, 1168).

[9] Cf. *Catechism*, 1753.

[10] *Ibid.*, 1754.

[11] *Ibid*.

[12] *Ibid.*, 1755.

[13] Cf. Rom 14:14-21.

[14] Cf. *Catechism*, 1734.

[15] *Catechism*, 1735.

[16] *Catechism*, 2006. Guilt is, therefore, the responsibility which we incur before God by sinning, making us deserving of punishment.

[17] Cf. *Catechism*, 2007.

[18] Cf. *Ibid.*, 2008.

[19] *Ibid.*, 2009. Cf. Council of Trent: DH 1546.

[20] *Catechism*, 2010.