

Moral Theology 101



1. Understanding “Freedom”

- a. Freedom can mean a variety of things. For example –
- b. **Natural freedom** – means we have **free will**. We are not merely highly complex biochemical mechanisms or highly evolved animals. We are **persons**.
- c. **Political freedom** – we have a variety of choices regarding our lives. The opposite of political freedom is tyranny.

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2. **Secular Freedom:** doing as one chooses with one’s natural and political freedom. There are no moral absolutes.
3. **Christian Freedom:** True freedom is to completely bind ourselves to truth and goodness. Freedom means to pursue the purpose we were created for – happiness found ultimately in union with God.
 - a. **Slavery** - is to not have control of our own passions, such as is the case with animals.
 - b. Having the “freedom” to abuse alcohol or drugs can lead to addictions whereby the person becomes a slave to the addiction.
 - c. True freedom is not to be able to “do whatever we want so long as we don’t hurt anyone.” *Authentic liberty is freedom to chose the good and avoid evil.*
4. Problems with Secular Freedom
 - a. It is self-contradictory. It starts with “I can do whatever I want”, but then it sees its own limitations so it also adds, “so long as you don’t hurt anyone else.”
 - b. Who decides what criteria we use to determine what “hurts someone else?”
 - c. “What about private acts? They don’t harm anyone.” Who decides what a private or public act is? Who decides what “harm” is and what isn’t? Secular freedom is actually misusing freedom.

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5. Objective Sources of Truth

- a. Right reason (natural law written into our very being)
 - i. Sanctity of life – we should continue ourselves in existence.
- b. Divine Revelation
 - a. Sacred Scriptures
 - b. Sacred Tradition

6. Traditional Catholic Moral Theology

- a. Traditional moral theology states that there are certain acts that are always evil, independent of the circumstances and intention of the one doing the act. These acts are termed as “intrinsically evil.” (See Appendix A)

- b. We could also say that there is a “moral bedrock” to which we should adhere. These are acts that can be judged as intrinsically evil and are prohibited (e.g. the direct and intentional removal of the procreative potential in marital relations – artificial birth control).

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How do we determine whether an act is morally good or morally evil?

7. The Idea of Teleology

- a. The Greek word telos means “end” or “goal”.
- b. Our ultimate end or goal is happiness in union with God – eternal life.
- c. Christian **morality** is teleological – **it is ordered toward our final end.**

8. The Three Aspects of the Moral Act

We must evaluate:

- 1) The **act** itself without any reference to the agent (person doing the act)
- 2) The **circumstances** within which the agent performs the act.
- 3) The **intention** with which the agent performs the act.

9. The Act

- a. An act is morally good when it points to the ordering of the person to his ultimate end and is acknowledged by truth through reason.
- b. An act that is not in harmony with the true good of the person is morally evil and puts us in conflict with our ultimate end, the supreme good, God himself. (*Veritatis Splendor* 72)
- c. Certain acts are always (intrinsically) **wrong** and their prohibition constitutes part of the moral bedrock.
- d. But for an act to be **sinful**, that is, to be culpable, 3 conditions need to be met:
 - 1) The act itself **has to be evil** rather than good or neutral
 - 2) The agent must **intend** the act, not forced or coerced.
 - 3) The agent must **know** the act is evil

What we must hold is summarized thus: **sin is** not some positive essence, but **a defect**, a corruptive tendency; that is, a force which contaminates mode, species, and order in the created will. Hence the corruptive power of sin . . . has no being except in a good, and no origin except from a good; which good is the will’s capacity for free choice.¹

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These conditions are important in the debate over intrinsically evil acts because they remind us that the claim that a particular act is evil (abortion for example) is not a claim that the person has sinned.

¹ Saint Bonaventure. (1963). *Breviloquium*. (J. De Vinck, Trans.) (Vol. 2, p. 109). Paterson, NJ: St. Anthony Guild Press.

- The agent and the act must be kept separate.
- Intention and circumstance may make a person less blameworthy.
- Intention and circumstance can turn a neutral or good act into something less than good.
- However, intention and circumstance can never make an evil act good.
- For an act to be a **mortal sin**, 3 conditions need to be met:
 - 1) The act has to be **grave (very serious)**. Violating any of the 10 Commandments for example.
 - 2) The agent must **intend** the act, not forced or coerced.
 - 3) The agent must **know** the act is evil

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10. Intent

- a. Consider a person who has planned to commit a robbery. His car breaks down on his way to rob the store. We must consider the fact that had the car worked properly, the person would have committed the crime. As a result, the intent causes the person to be a thief.

11. Circumstance

- a. One should always return property to the rightful owner – in other words, don't steal. But what if a person whose gun you have asks for it back and you know he is going to use it to kill an innocent person or commit suicide? Circumstance enters into the very moral object in this case. You not giving him the gun is not an act of theft or failure to return property.

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The Moral Bedrock Part 2

Principle of Double Effect (PDE)

PDE is when an action causes both a good and evil effect.

It must pass 4 criteria:

- 1) The moral object must be the good or neutral, not intrinsically evil.
- 2) The evil result is tolerated not intended. The evil effect stems **indirectly** from the act and the good stems **directly** from the act.
- 3) The good effect doesn't occur as a result of the evil effect.

4) There must be a proportionate reason for doing the act. Implies that there are no other alternatives.

If these conditions are met, then one only indirectly causes the evil, thus the act is moral.

Examples:

- Person in coma being removed from the respirator. The good effect is the placing of a life into nature's hand or God's hands, so to speak. The bad effect is death itself. Removing extraordinary treatment is neutral. Removal intends the good effect and tolerates the death. The death is not caused by the removal of treatment, but by the body's natural inability to breathe.
- Removing a cancerous uterus from a pregnant woman is another good example of PDE.

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- c) The **intention** with which the agent performs the act.

Note: The Act must be ordered towards our final end – union with God in heaven

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13. The Act

- a. Certain acts are always (intrinsically) **wrong** and their prohibition constitutes part of the moral bedrock.
- b. But for an act to be **sinful**, that is, to be culpable, 3 conditions need to be met:
 1. The act itself **has to be evil** rather than good or neutral
 2. The agent must **intend** the act, not forced or coerced.
 3. The agent must **know** the act is evil

Remember:

- The agent and the act must be kept separate.
- Intention and circumstance may make a person less blameworthy.
- Intention and circumstance can turn a neutral or good act into something less than good.
- However, intention and circumstance can never make an evil act good.

Appendix A

<i>Object in restricted sense</i>	<i>Circumstance of the <u>object</u></i>	<i>Intent of the <u>Agent</u> w/o <u>personal</u> motive or circumstance</i>	<i>Intrinsic Evil (synthetic terms)</i>	<i>Circumstance and motive of the <u>Agent</u></i>
1) Killing	Innocent	Intentional taking of a life	Murder	(varied)
2) Withholding Truth	From one who has a right to the truth with . . .	Intent to deceive	Lie	
3) Taking property	Against reasonable will of owner with . . .	Intent to take	Theft	
4) Conjugal Act (the sexual act)	Used in a way that violates its unitive & procreative meaning	Intentional violation of the meaning	Contraception, sterilization, fornication, adultery, etc.	
5) Use of the General faculties (sexual faculties)	Used in a way that violates their unitive & procreative meaning	Intentional violation of the meaning	Homosexual acts, bestiality, auto-eroticism (masturbation), incest	
6) "Building" a baby	In a way severed from the conjugal act	Intentional	New birth technologies (in vitro fertilization, etc.)	↓

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