

Absolute Moral Norms in
Contemporary Moral Theology

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Introduction

In this paper I will be discussing two views of moral norms, the Proportionalist view and the Deontological view. I will first describe these two opposing views and their main ideas. Then I will offer a criticism of the Proportionalist position, which I feel is inferior to the Deontological view. Before proceeding, some language has to be explained.

The first thing is to explain what is meant by absolute moral norms. Moral norms can be divided into two kinds, Formal and Material. This categorizing has become prominent especially because of the currency of the Proportionalist position.

Formal norms are more general and less descriptive than material norms. They are tautologies. That is, Formal norms would tell us that "murder is wrong", but the definition of murder is to kill a person unjustly, or a "wrongful killing".

Likewise, we ought never to have sex with the wrong person, because such sex is also wrong by definition. Yet norms like this are tautological and do not help us know which specific kinds of killing are unjust or what specific kind of sex is sex with the wrong person, etc.(1)

Formal norms "articulate what our inner dispositions and attitudes ought to be. It is thus always true that we should act justly, bravely, chastely, and so on".(2)

"Formal norms are limited in that they do not determine the specific content of what we ought to do".(3) Formal norms are exceptionless, and so absolute, but they are also empty. The question is whether there is a norm

with content that is also exceptionless.

Material norms are more exact. They tell us which

"actions we ought to perform. Material norms attempt to attach formal norms of virtue or vice to specific instances of behavior--to speech, to killing, to making promises, to sexual conduct, for example. Thus we have material norms like these: entrusted secrets ought to be kept, give to each what is due him or her, do not speak falsely, do not kill, do not use artificial means of contraception, do not use artificial insemination or in vitro fertilization. Material norms lead us closer to answering the practical moral question, "What should I do?".(4)

Material norms are the norms that will be discussed in this paper. Any reference to absolute moral norms, moral norms, or any derivation of that will be a reference to Material norms.

It should be noted that the term Proportionalism is sometimes used interchangeably with Revisionist, and Consequentialism. Also, the Deontological position is used interchangeably with the Theory of Basic Goods. I do not take up any discussion of the correct usage of these terms in this paper.

Proportionalism

There are quite a few moral theologians who represent the Proportionalist position on moral norms. They differ in some ways, not always in the positions that they take, but in the language that they use to talk about their positions. I will initially outline these different positions, indicating the common ideas that flow through them.

The first major step in the development of Proportionalism was taken by Peter Knauer. Knauer believes that there should be a distinction made between physical (or premoral) evil and moral evil. Moral evil depends on the agent's intention, and a moral judgement cannot be made about an action until human intention is made known. There is no moral value that can be attached to an action apart from the intention of the agent.(1) Premoral evil, on the other hand, is the harm that an action may effect, but to know that an action is harmful is not necessarily to know that it is morally wrong. For instance, killing is harmful, but killing in self-defense is not morally wrong. Premoral evil differs from moral evil in that moral evil is an evil that was wrongly done, but we can determine this only from what Knauer calls "commensurate reason." According to this line of thinking, moral evil is the acceptance of physical evil without proportionate reason.(2) Therefore, Knauer does not believe that there can be absolute material moral norms, because such moral norms

speak of prohibitions of actions prior to taking account of a person's intentions. Knauer would say that the prohibition of murder is a universal norm because murder is an unjust killing and a consideration of the intention is built into the norm. The prohibition of killing, however, would not be a universal norm because it does not include those instances when killing would be just, such as in the instance of self-defense.

The next thinker who represents the Proportionalist position is Bruno Schuller. Schuller's main thesis is what has come to be known as his "preference principle," here stated by Richard Gula:

Any ethical norm whatsoever regarding our dealings and omissions in relation to other men or the environment can be only a particular application of that more universal norm, "The greater good is to be preferred".(3)

Schuller's position embodies the idea of Proportionalism. He believes in limited norms; that is, that norms should be followed except when another more important value is present which deserves preference.(4) According to Schuller, therefore, there are no absolute material moral norms; such moral norms are not exceptionless. If there is a greater good to be pursued, then it is possible to commit a premoral evil.(5) Again, premoral evils are things such as, killing and stealing.

I would like to spend a little more time on Josef Fuchs. Fuchs wrote an article in 1971 called "The Absoluteness of Moral Terms", which has become very influential in the Proportionalist line of thought.

Fuchs tries to criticize the idea of absolute moral norms in a variety of ways. He starts with Holy Scripture and states that, "Holy Scripture was never meant to be a handbook on morality: consequently it may not be so used".(6) He believes that scripture, when addressing how men should live, deals with the personal human being as a whole and not with specific moral conduct.

When discussing Holy Scripture, Fuchs limits himself to the New Testament. He speaks of the Sermon on the Mount and says that these teachings are not to be looked at as absolute norms but as "models for the behavior of the believing and loving citizens of God's kingdom who would be ready for such modes of conduct". (7) Fuchs states that Paul's teachings are not teachings that relate specifically Christian norms of conduct. He also believes that what Paul does relate, in many ways, is historically and culturally conditioned. Fuchs says that,

the moral behavioral norms in Scripture are directed to actual persons of a definite era and culture. Hence their character of absoluteness would not signify primarily universality, but objectivity.(8)

Therefore, according to Fuchs, we should realize that the modes of behavior put forth in the New Testament can only be looked at as being absolute for that society.

Fuchs then next looks at how norms have evolved in the ecclesial community. He states that the Church did not inherit a system of moral norms from Christ, Paul, or John, but has always maintained definite moral norms

and passed them on to later generations.(9) Fuchs then asks why the Church teaches norms of moral conduct.

"The reason often given runs: Because the Church has to teach the way to salvation and true morality is the way to salvation".(10) It is faith and love, however, that is centrally the way to salvation, and the notion that the Church helps the faithful to incarnate their faith and love through its moral teachings doesn't entirely satisfy.(11) Fuchs says that it is sometimes stated that the Holy Spirit imparts to the Church what it did not impart through Holy Scripture. With regard to moral norms, though, this makes the Church look too spiritual, when in fact it is very human. The Church really arrives at norms of moral conduct by way of a long process of learning to understand and evaluate human conduct.(12)

He also states that:

It is noteworthy that in two thousand years of the Church seemingly no definitive doctrinal decision has been made, at least insofar as these would be related to natural law, without being at the same time revealed. (13)

Fuchs says that "new questions will come up again, because of new experiences, insights, and evaluations, therefore, in a new light and in a changed culture".

(14) Since man changes as do societies, it would be inconceivable that all Church traditions or decisions concerning moral behavioral norms would be absolute.(15) Man's nature changes throughout time with new experiences and in the context of different societies. If the nature of man changes then

the Natural Law must be expressed in a way that takes these changes into account. If Natural Law changes, then it would follow that moral norms must change, because they can only be realized with an understanding of the nature of man.(16) Fuchs states that "frequently our statements of norms are inexact, inasmuch as they do not--perhaps cannot--take into consideration all the possibilities of the human reality".(17)

As seen previously with the other writers, Fuchs wants to make a distinction between moral and premoral evil. He states that "an action cannot be judged morally in its materiality (killing, wounding, going to the moon) without reference to the intention of the agent," and "the evil (in a premoral sense) effected by a human agent must not be intended as such, and must be justified in terms of the totality of the action by appropriate reasons".(18) Fuchs continues:

A moral judgment of an action may not be made in anticipation of the agent's intention, since it would not be the judgment of a human act, and, a moral judgment is legitimately formed only under a simultaneous consideration of the three elements (action, circumstance, purpose).(19)

He concludes that "They cannot be moral norms, unless circumstances and intention are taken into account".

(20) Since it is impossible to judge the morality of an action independently of circumstances and intention, then it is impossible to have universal moral norms previous to circumstances and intentions. "The absoluteness of a norm depends more upon the objectivity of its relationship to reality than upon its universality".(21)

Louis Janssens brings a couple of things to this discussion. He states that Aquinas believed that to understand human action one had to look at the person, most importantly the intention of the will.(22) Moreover:

To give an act the character of moral goodness, it is therefore not enough that the end of the subject is morally good: the act is good only when the exterior action is proportionate to the end according to reason, when there is no contradiction of the means and the end in the whole of the act on the level of reason.(23)

To help to explain his position, Janssens uses the notion "ontic evil". This term is equivalent to Knauer's "physical evil" and Fuchs'"premoral evil". Ontic evil is the lack of perfection in anything. Relative to us, ontic evil is "any lack of fulfillment which frustrates our natural urges and makes us suffer". (24) Gula, when speaking of Janssens, says that "this means that we are not able to realize the good without causing or admitting to some ontic evil". (25) What Janssens is talking about is that if an ontic evil (premoral evil) is present, it does not mean that it makes the overall act morally evil. Janssens provides an example:

According to "Gaudium et spes" the marriage act must be ordered to the conjugal love and to the human transmission of life, viz., to responsible parenthood. This must be the end of marital intercourse; each conjugal act must include a "debita proportio" to this end. Consequently, if the marriage partners engage in sexual intercourse during the fertile period and thereby most likely will conceive new life, the marital act may not be morally justifiable when they foresee that they will not have the means to provide the proper education for the child. The rhythm method, too, can be immoral if it is used to prevent the measure

of responsible parenthood. But the use of contraceptives can be morally justified if these means do not obstruct the partners in the expression of conjugal love and if they keep birth control within the limits of responsible parenthood. Marital intercourse can be called neither moral nor immoral when it is the object of a judgment which considers it without due regard for its end. A moral evaluation is only possible if it is a study of the totality of the conjugal act, viz., when one considers whether or not the conjugal act (means) negates the requirements of love and responsible parenthood (end).(26)

In this example, the use of contraception produces an ontic evil. It is not possible to judge whether the use of contraception is morally evil, however, until the intentions of the agents are known, and so the end. If marital intercourse, using contraception, retains the requirements of conjugal love and responsible parenthood, then the use of such contraception may be morally justified. This reasoning is also another way of showing that not just the act must be considered when making a moral decision, but the intention and the end as well. Janssens states it as such, "If our actions contain more ontic evil than they must have to be the proper means, they are not ordered properly to the goals of man and society. Consequently, they are immoral". (27) This is the essence of Proportionalism.

When discussing Proportionalism, it would be a mistake to leave out Richard McCormick. He, just like our previous writers, believes in the use of "proportionate reason".(28) McCormick would say that "actions which cause non-moral evil (Knauer's "physical evil," Fuchs' "pre-moral evil," and Janssens' "ontic evil" or "pre-moral disvalue") are moral only if there is

a truly proportionate reason which justifies the action".(29) This does not further the progress of Proportionalism much, but what McCormick has helped to develop is the criteria for a proportionate reason. He gives three criteria for proportionate reason which Richard Gula outlines for us:

Proportionate reason means three things: (a) a value at least equal to that sacrificed is at stake; (b) there is no less harmful way of protecting the values here and now; (c) the manner of its protection here and now will not undermine it in the long run.(30)

McCormick relates his belief in the importance of our attending to non-moral evils and says that we ought to strive to the point where causing or permitting them would no longer be required. He believes that in this world causing or permitting non-moral evil is acceptable with proportionate reason.(31)

One more theory must be established to give an accurate depiction of the proportionalist point of view when it comes to moral norms. That theory is the Theory of Fundamental Option. According to this theory, our actions by themselves are ambiguous. To fully understand a person's actions, we must compare them to the overall stance the person has taken in their life. According to this theory, not all of our actions express the kind of person that we have chosen to be. This would mean that even if a person chooses to commit a moral evil, it may not affect him substantially because it does not reflect his innermost being.(32)

We have canvassed the position of the Proportionalist method of determining moral good and

evil. Each thinker uses different terminology (McCormick's "non-moral evil," Knauer's "physical evil," Fuchs' "pre-moral evil," and Janssens' "ontic evil" or "pre-moral disvalue"), but each is trying to relate the same idea that we cannot judge actions before they are committed and the intentions and circumstances behind them are known. There is also a train of thought in all of them that states that moral decisions should be based upon which ends will achieve the greatest proportion of good. This is obviously where the term "Proportionalism" comes from. Other names given to this line of thought are "Consequentialist," "Revisionist," and "Teleological".

Deontology

Proportionalists call those who support the truth of absolute material moral norms "Deontologists" (Note: Proportionalists think in this way to tar their opponents with the brush of Kantianism. I do not take up this problem, but do not necessarily agree with the imputation.) Deontologists uphold what they see as the tradition of the Church, by saying that moral norms exist. They do this in a variety of ways, one of which is the refutation of the Proportionalist conception of morality. I will present three modern deontological moral theologians; Pope John Paul II, William May, and John Finnis.

In 1993, John Paul II released the encyclical "Veritatis Splendor". The purpose of this encyclical is,

to set forth, with regard to the problems being discussed, the principles of a moral teaching based upon Sacred Scripture and the living Apostolic Tradition, and at the same time to shed light on the presuppositions and consequences of the dissent which that teaching has met.(1)

This encyclical met with a very large response, especially from the revisionist (Proportionalist) theologians because it affirmed much of what they denied. It was, in many ways addressed to those theologians who were seen, by Rome, as supporting erroneous moral teachings.

John Paul II says that actions are morally good if they are ordered toward the true good of the person and to their supreme good, God.(2) The good is established

as the eternal law by God. This eternal law can be known through reason and is called the natural law.

He next states that "there exist false solutions, linked in particular to an inadequate understanding of the object of moral action".(3) Consequentialism and proportionalism are two such theories that make this mistake. Consequentialism focuses on the consequences of an action and then judges whether the action is morally right or wrong based upon the calculation of those consequences. Proportionalism focuses on the possible good and bad effects of a particular action and judges the action morally good if the action results in a greater good or if the action results in a lesser evil.(4) John Paul II says of these theories:

Such theories however are not faithful to the Church's teaching, when they believe they can justify, as morally good, deliberate choices of kinds of behavior contrary to the commandments of the divine and natural law. These theories cannot claim to be grounded in the Catholic moral tradition.(5)

John Paul II states that "when the Apostle Paul sums up the fulfillment of the law in the precept of love of neighbor as oneself, he is not weakening the commandments but reinforcing them".(6) This seems to be in response to the notion that in the New Testament no absolute norms were put forth (See Fuchs). The Pope is alluding to the Decalogue and its commandments regarding the moral life.

John Paul II teaches, with Aquinas, that "the morality of the human act depends primarily and fundamentally on the "object" rationally chosen by the

deliberate will".(7) He says that intention of a further, ulterior good and end, is not good enough. There has to be a correct choice of actions as well. If any part of an action is evil, then the whole of the action is evil. The human act depends on its object which has to be ordered to the ultimate good, God.

This line of thinking would mean that some "ontic evils" are never "premoral". That is, while the death of an innocent man, as such, is simply an "ontic evil", it can never be chosen morally as the object of choice no matter what intended good end it may be connected with. John Paul II is saying that all actions need to be good actions, that the choice of at least some "premoral evils" are always morally evil, always contrary to man's ultimate end and good. This end, again, is God.

John Paul II disagrees with the theory of the fundamental option as well, and says that all of our actions determine the kind of people we are. He says:

Once the moral species of an action prohibited by a universal rule is concretely recognized, the only morally good act is that of obeying the moral law and of refraining from the action which it forbids.(8)

If we know an action is wrong, and if we are free to commit the action, and if it concerns serious matter, then our stance before God is at stake. Of course the Holy Father recognizes that we make a fundamental choice, to direct our lives in a certain way, but each individual action contributes and determines that fundamental choice.(9) But one action is capable of

contradicting and reversing it. Finally, "every choice always implies a reference by the deliberate will to the goods and evils indicated by the natural law as goods to be pursued and evils to be avoided".(10)

William May echoes John Paul II by saying that human acts are free, self-determining choices. He says that we determine who we are by the actions we freely choose to do. Revisionist theologians believe that individual, daily actions do not necessarily express or form the kind of persons that we truly are. They believe that this is explained with the theory of fundamental option. However:

the Catholic tradition affirms the saving (or damning) significance of our daily deeds--of the free choices we make every day. Vatican Council II affirmed that we will find perfected in heaven the very good fruits of human nature and work that we nurture here on earth. The New Testament teaches us that redemption includes all human goods and the cosmos itself (see Rom 8.21; 1 Cor 3.22-23; Eph 1.1), and the Church proclaims that the spiritual and temporal orders, while distinct, are so intimately linked in God's plan that he intends in Christ to appropriate the whole universe into a new creation, "beginning here and now on earth and finding its fulfillment on the last day."(11)

If we are to become the kind of persons that God wills us to be, we must make good moral choices.

May's position depends on the recognition of basic goods. According to the Basic Goods theory, there are certain goods that should never be acted against. Any action that negates, or acts against, one of these basic goods is considered morally evil. Some of these basic goods would include human life, health, knowledge of the truth, appreciation of beauty, and friendship. He continues:

in making choices we ought to choose those and only those alternatives whose willing is compatible with a love for all the goods of human persons and of the persons in whom those goods are meant to flourish. A person who chooses in a morally bad way does not respect and love the good gifts of God and the persons in whom these gifts are meant to exist. He or she chooses to act in a way that fails to honor the basic goods of human persons and the persons whom these goods perfect and ennoble.(12)

Noting Germain Grisez, May states that we are not freely to choose to commit any action that damages, destroys, or impedes what is truly good either in ourselves or in others.(13) He continues:

We ought not, then, freely choose to destroy the goods of human persons. Moral norms proscribing action in which, of necessity, our will ratifies the deprivation of these goods are absolute, exceptionless.(14)

From this notion, we can derive more specific moral norms, such as the prohibition of the deliberate choice to kill innocent human life, or to commit adultery.(15)

Moral norms are negative, but they allow human persons to keep themselves open to the kind of persons they are meant to be. They remind us that there are some actions that make us persons whose hearts are closed to the full range of human goods and to the persons in whom these goods are meant to exist. It is not possible to have a heart open to and responsive to what is really good if, through choices and action, we are willing evil.

Moral absolutes show us what love cannot mean: it cannot mean that we deliberately set our wills against the good gifts that God wills to flourish in his children and close our hearts to our neighbors.(16)

May concludes by saying that:

Moral absolutes remind us that by freely choosing to damage, destroy, or impede what is really good either in ourselves or in others--even for the noblest motives--we make ourselves to be evildoers. But human persons, made in the image of the holy and triune God, are to be, like him, absolutely innocent of evil. God wills properly and "per se"--i.e., as end or means--only what is good. He permits evil, but he does not choose to do evil or intend that evil be. Likewise we, his children, ought never freely choose to do evil, to intend that evil be.(17)

When May talks about willing evil, he is opposed to the Proportionalist position that premoral evil is permissibly chosen when a proportionate reason exists for committing the act. He believes that if such a "premoral evil action" is committed, the whole action is morally evil. This is not so for the Proportionalists, as we have seen.

The final theologian that I will discuss is John Finnis. Finnis also disagrees with many of the Proportionalists positions. He discusses the same ideas that the Proportionalists did, but draws very different conclusions than what they had.

Moral norms are witnessed to explicitly and implicitly in the New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers. The Decalogue is even referred to more in the New Testament than in the whole of the Old Testament. Finnis notes that:

St. Paul speaks of its precepts as written on human hearts and befitting human nature (for example, Romans 1:23-31; 2:14-15; by "the Law" in the latter passage he means primarily the Decalogue: see 13:8-10). But these are also precepts of Christ; the Lord is shown reaffirming them in the encounter with the "rich young man" (Matthew 19:16-19; Mark 10:17-19; Luke 18:18-20), interiorizing and in other ways radicalizing (without disincarnating) them in the Sermon on the

Mount (Matthew 5:17-28), summarizing without dissolving them in the supreme commandments of love of God and neighbor (Matthew 19:19; 22:36-40), and interpreting them paradigmatically, and with explicit reference to the original order of creation, in his teaching on adultery and the indissolubility of true marriage (Matthew 19:4-9; Mark 10:4-12; Luke 16:18).(18)

These passages relate the exemplary meaning and force of specific moral absolutes.

One of the Proportionalist's objection to the truth of specific moral absolutes is that they unduly narrow one's focus when deliberating over a moral decision.

They contend that:

reason, objectivity, and truth require that an action be evaluated only as a totality--a totality which includes all the premoral (but morally relevant) goods and bads involved in that totality--with a view to ascertaining the behavior which will effect overall net human good.(19)

This objection is unsound. When choosing an option that is right, a person must consider all of the morally relevant circumstances. A person, though, is able to judge an agent's action to be wrong as soon as they identify "a morally significant defect in one's motivations, or an inappropriateness in relation either to the circumstances or to the means involved in that option".(20) A person:

who, in accordance with a moral absolute, excludes an option as wrong in not excused from doing everything morally possible to pursue the goods which could have been sought by violating the moral absolute. Such a person's horizons are in no way narrowed".(21)

There also exists the contention that moral norms change because human nature is changeable. A lot of problems come along with the notion that human nature changes. For instance, "Gaudium et Spes" pronounced a

specific moral absolute: "Every act of war which is directed indiscriminately to the destruction of whole towns or wide areas with their inhabitants is a crime against God and man".(22) Finnis remarks that:

No one has yet tried to indicate how a change in human nature might render untrue a moral norm which was pronounced in reflective judgment on acts most of which had, only twenty years earlier, been carried out in the just cause of defending human civilization and indeed the church against the genocidal Nazi enemy.(23)

In addition, if the People of God were wrong in accepting the truth of moral absolutes and accepting them as truths integral to salvation, and the church's magisterium is wrong in proclaiming their truth to this day, then the possibility would follow that God may not have revealed anything to a people, or ever constituted a people of God at all.(24)

Aquinas also upholds the truth of moral absolutes when he says in his "De malo" that "adultery," "fornication," "lying," "murder," and so on, are defined as wrongful.(25) In this writing, Aquinas upholds the teaching that adultery, defined as sex with another's spouse, is always wrong, whatever the circumstances. Finnis makes this statement because of the commonly held belief by Proportionalists that Aquinas did not teach moral absolutes and was really a Proportionalist himself.

The distinction between ends and means of an action are only relative. Both ends and means comprise the totality of a particular action. As Aquinas says, one's proposal, end and means, is the object of one's choice

and act.(26) If we choose to murder somebody, it doesn't matter how we do it, the object of the action is murder; the means were implicit in the proposal of murder. For instance:

If we decide to kill our child or our aged aunt to collect on the insurance or the will, we may then settle on doing it with a pillow or a needle, or on achieving the same end simply by omitting to supply food. Either way, we have chosen and act of murder; bringing about death was built into the proposal, as the means we adopted in adopting that proposal by choice.(27)

There is also a difference between intending evil as opposed to accepting an evil side effect of an, otherwise, good action. For instance, a woman who has her womb removed so that she can avoid the nuisance of pregnancy, contrasts sharply with the woman who has her womb removed to prevent the spread of cancer. In this example the end of the action is decidedly different, but the means remain the same.(28) We have free choice when it comes to actions and our character is defined by the choices that we make. Finnis notes:

The intention of an act has the significance it has in the identification and evaluation of the act, precisely because choice has the creative self-constitutive importance it has. That importance is so great that Aquinas placed the whole of his mature work under this prologue: "Since man is said to be made in the image of God because 'image' here refers to intelligent and free choice..., let us consider man, that image, precisely insofar as he is himself the origin of his own deeds, through having free choice and power over those deeds."(29)

Now we have seen the Deontologist's point of view. They believe that moral norms do not change. Moral norms are affirmed by the Church's tradition including the Decalogue, Aquinas, Vatican II, and Pope John Paul

II. Deontologists refute the theory of the fundamental option, saying that each individual act determines who we are. They also state that moral norms do not limit the options that one can take. One cannot choose evil so that good may come, and all decisions must be ordered to man's ultimate end, God.

Problems with Proportionalism

In the two previous sections we have seen both the Proportionalist view and the Deontologist view on absolute moral norms. I would now like to state clearly what seem to me to be the failures of the Proportionalist view. We have seen some of this when the Deontologist view was presented, but I would like to present some arguments more fully.

The first argument that I would like to present deals with the historicity of human existence. Proportionalists have claimed that since society progresses and Man changes so do things like the Natural Law and moral norms. This would lead one to conclude that certain things that were morally wrong at one point in time could possibly be acceptable at another point in time. For instance, the act of rape has always been seen as immoral no matter what century it occurred. It is hard to see what kind of human progress would ever allow for rape to be morally acceptable, and one would question whether it was progress that had occurred.

The next argument is against the notion of the preference principle or the principle of proportionate good. This Proportionalist notion presents the idea of doing the lesser evil or the greatest good when faced with a moral decision.

Revisionist theologians seem to consider the "principle of proportionate good" to be self-evidently true. According to it we are to choose the alternative promising the greater balance of good over evil. If this principle is not

true, they say, then the absurdity seems to follow that we ought to choose the alternative promising the greater proportion of evil over good.(1)

This principle states that, given a moral situation, it is possible to determine, prior to choice, "which among various alternatives is morally good by balancing or measuring or commensurating in some way the different nonmoral goods and evils in these different options".(2)

The insuperable problem here, as Germain Grisez, John Finnis, and Joseph Boyle have shown, is that there can be no unambiguous or homogeneous measure according to which the goods in question (such goods as human life itself, health, knowledge of the truth, appreciation of beauty, friendship) can be compared with one another or according to which individual instances of these goods (e.g., the life of Mary Smith and the life of Peter Jones) can be weighed or measured or "commensurated".(3)

To try to commensurate these goods is not possible. It is like comparing apples and oranges. "The goods involved in moral choice are not reducible to some common denominator".(4) May presents the best

Proportionalist response, given by Garth Hallett:

the comparison of goods is possible because the intelligibly appealing features of the various alternatives of choice can be said to have more or less "value," in some sense of "value" that remains the same as one moves from one feature to another. By comparing goods in this way, he alleges, one can discover the alternative promising the greater good, for it will have all the "value" promised by any other alternative and more.(5)

This reply does not hold up. John Finnis states that:

if one option seems to a deliberating agent to offer all that the alternatives offer and some more, the alternatives simply fall away; they completely lose the intelligible appeal which made them options... Morally significant choices...are not and cannot be made in situations where the alternatives to option X have nothing intelligibly attractive which X does not have, and X has everything the alternatives have, and some.(6)

The Proportionalist position supporting the

preference principle believes that "a person who is willing to intend a lesser nonmoral evil for the sake of a greater nonmoral good has a greater willingness or love of the good than does one who refuses to do such evil".(7) May presents two examples that refute this notion.

It would seem to follow that a nation threatened by a ruthless adversary would have a greater love or will for the good if it is willing to execute the adversary's children in order to deter the adversary from carrying out planned injustices than if it is willing to defend itself by attacking the adversary but unwilling to hold the adversary's children as hostages and executing them. Or a man willing to swear to a document setting forth beliefs that he does not hold in order to stay alive, care for his wife and family, and do noble deeds has a greater love of the good than, say, St. Thomas More, who was unwilling to do so.(8)

It is easy to see that the "preference principle" and the "principle of proportionate good" are not theories that hold up well under scrutiny. The end effect of these theories is that moral decisions end up allowing for an evil action so that a good may be achieved. This notion is clearly not acceptable.

Another reason that the Proportionalists give for the refutation of Moral Absolutes is the idea that the morality of a given act cannot be determined unless the act is considered in its totality or wholeness.

Therefore, if we cannot determine actions morally until the totality of the act is known, there are no absolute moral norms. The problem with this idea is that theologians who support moral absolutes "do not ignore the purposes or intentions of the agents; rather, they insist that both the "remote" or "ulterior" end and the

"proximate" end of the agent's action must be taken into account".(9) Furthermore, it is not true that an action may not be deemed morally evil until all of the elements of the action are known, "for if we know that any of its elements is bad, we know that the whole act is morally vitiated".(10)

[Human acts] already known to be bad by reason of their "objects" (i.e., the intelligible subject matter upon which the agent's will must bear as a chosen means to some ulterior end) remain morally bad even if the circumstances in which they are chosen or the end for whose sake they are adopted as means are good.(11)

Recall our earlier discussion of Janssen's view.

Janssens said that contraception was not necessarily morally evil as long as marital intercourse still maintained the expression of conjugal love and, for instance, if the couple were to conceive and give birth, they would not be able to provide for the needs of the child. This is an example of a proportionalist looking at what he would call the "totality of the human act". He would say that the use of contraception is a premoral evil and until the action is considered in the wider context that includes both the end and the consequences, it is not possible to determine whether the action was morally evil. It would be necessary to look at the circumstances and the intentions before determining whether a moral evil was committed. Unfortunately, the proportionalists are wrong. The reason that they are wrong is that they are admitting that it is possible to commit evil so that good may be done. The intention is to use contraception, which acts directly against a

basic human good, the procreation of new life. As soon as a moral evil is committed the whole act is wrong, no matter what the further consequences involved. The marriage act is ordered toward both conjugal love and the transmission of life. If one of these aspects of the act were to be intentionally removed, then the act would be morally evil. It would be evil, as well, if marital intercourse were done only for the transmission of life and not for conjugal love.

We have seen that the Proportionalist view has faulty ideas regarding the historicity of human existence, the preference principle, and the nature of the human act as a whole. None of these refutations of the denial of moral norms end up being plausible. It is clear that Proportionalists are trying to explain the human condition in a way that they see as being more pastoral or better suited for today's society, but that can't be at the cost of compromising morality. What proportionalism ends up being is the acceptance of any actions as long as a person feels that his reasons are good enough for committing that action. It is almost impossible to get out of the moral relativism that naturally follows such a position. I suggest that we need to give up on Proportionalism as a moral theory and look to theories that are obviously more plausible.

Notes For Chapter One

1. William E. May, An Introduction to Moral Theology (Huntington, In.: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 1994), p. 112.
2. Ibid.
3. Richard M. Gula, Reason Informed By Faith: Foundations of Catholic Morality (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), p. 289.
4. Ibid., p. 289.

Notes For Chapter Two

1. Timothy E. O'Connell, "The Question of Moral Norms," American Ecclesiastical Review 169(1975), 379.
2. Ibid., p. 379.
3. Richard M. Gula, What Are They Saying About Moral Norms? (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), p. 65.
4. Ibid., p. 66.
5. Ibid.
6. Josef Fuchs S.J., "The Absoluteness of Moral Terms," Gregorianum 52(1971), p. 418.
7. Ibid., p. 419.
8. Ibid., p. 421.
9. Ibid., p. 422.
10. Ibid., p. 423.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., p. 425.
13. Ibid., p. 426.
14. Ibid., p. 427.
15. Ibid., p. 427.
16. Ibid., pp. 428-432.
17. Ibid., p. 441.
18. Ibid., pp. 444-445.

19. Ibid., p. 445.
20. Ibid., p. 446.
21. Ibid.
22. Louis Janssens, "Ontic Evil and Moral Evil," Readings in Moral Theology no.1, Moral Norms and Catholic Tradition. Ed. Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick S.J. (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), p. 44.
23. Ibid., p. 55.
24. Ibid., p. 60.
25. Gula, What Are they Saying?, p. 72.
26. Janssens, pp. 72-73.
27. Ibid., p. 80.
28. Gula., 74.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid., pp. 74-75.
31. Ibid., p. 76.
32. Richard M. Gula, Reason Informed By Faith: Foundations of Catholic Morality (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), pp. 78-81.

Notes For Chapter Three

1. John Paul II, "Veritatis Splendor" (Boston, MA.: St. Paul Books and Media, 1993), p. 15.
2. Ibid., pp. 91-92.
3. Ibid., p. 94.
4. Ibid., p. 95.
5. Ibid., p. 97.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., pp. 98-99.
8. Ibid., p. 87.
9. Ibid., p. 86.
10. Ibid., pp. 86-87.

11. William E. May, An Introduction to Moral Theology (Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 1994), p. 129.

12. Ibid., p. 130.

13. William E. May, Moral Absolutes: Catholic Tradition, Current Trends, and the Truth (Milwaukee, WI.: Marquette University Press, 1989), pp. 74-75.

14. Ibid., p. 75.

15. May, Introduction, p. 130.

16. Ibid., p. 131.

17. Ibid., p. 132.

18. John Finnis, Moral Absolutes: Tradition, Revision, and Truth (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991), p. 7.

19. Ibid., p. 16.

20. Ibid., p. 17.

21. Ibid.

22. Austin Flannery, O.P., ed., "Gaudium et spes," Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 990.

23. Finnis, p. 25.

24. Ibid., p. 30.

25. Ibid., p. 35.

26. Ibid., p. 69.

27. Ibid., p. 70.

28. Ibid., pp. 71-72.

29. Ibid., pp. 73-74.

Notes For Chapter Four

1. William E. May, An Introduction to Moral Theology (Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 1994), p. 120.

2. Ibid., p. 120.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., p. 121.
5. Ibid., p. 122.
6. John Finnis, Moral Absolutes: Tradition, Revision, and Truth (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991), p. 52.
7. May, p. 123.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., p. 124.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.

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