

Veritatis Splendor: Consequentialism, Proportionalism and Christian Morality

For the uninitiated, the most difficult part of *Veritatis Splendor* comes in Chapter II. Where criteria for moral judgment, elaborated by certain theologians after the Council, are discussed, we cannot blame the encyclical for becoming technical here; it is inevitable given the theories being critiqued. Rather, we have to appreciate its relatively simple exposition of these theories. The encyclical confines itself to essentials and shows, moreover, a certain delicacy in not citing any author by name and in pointing out the good to be found in some aspects of the research done in the area of moral theology (no. 47).

The historical point of departure for the debate was the reaction of certain theologians to the position of *Humanae Vitae* in regard to contraception in 1968. The method used by classical casuistry in determining the moral quality of human acts, those allowed and those prohibited, especially in doubtful cases, was critiqued. The debate was carried on at two levels: that of finality linked with intention, and that of concrete judgment, notably in the use of the principle of double effect for the solution of difficult cases.

The Notion of Finality

The casuistry of recent centuries had reduced the consideration of finality, in cases of conscience, to the end sought by the subject or included in the individual action. Theft would consist in taking the goods of another for oneself, for example, with the intention of buying a car or drugs. It neglected what we might call a broader finality, the ordering of human acts in their totality to an ultimate end, beatitude, which gives orientation and meaning to the entire life of a person.

Taking its stand upon Scripture, the Fathers of the Church, and St. Thomas, the encyclical pronounces in favor of restoring the value of ordering actions to our ultimate end and beatitude, and considers "teleology" thus understood as legitimate. But it faults certain innovative ethicists for viewing this broader sense of finality in too subjective a way, and for not taking into account sufficiently the fact that because of our spiritual nature we are objectively ordered to God as our last end, and therefore cannot dispose of the finality of our actions at will, simply because our intentions are good. Any action whatsoever can be ordered to a person's true last end; yet certain actions are by their very nature contrary to the search for and the love of this end. It is subjective "teleologism" that the encyclical views with disfavor (nos. 73-74).

The Principle of Double Effect

On the plane of judging difficult cases casuistry used the argument of double effect to resolve problems. A person could perform an action which had a good effect (for example, saving the life of a pregnant woman) and an evil effect (through medical intervention) in such a way that the evil effect was at no point intended as a means for attaining the good effect, but was viewed merely as a consequence, accepted for a proportionately serious reason.

The reinterpretation of this process of judgment is at the origin of "consequentialism" and "proportionalism." It results from the following reasoning: in reality, every human act has

consequences or produces effects that are both good and evil. For example, a cement or plastic factory is useful from many points of view, but causes pollution. Medication can have injurious side effects. In order to judge the value of an action we would have to list all its effects, good and evil, briefly or at length, and set up a comparison, a "proportion" between them in order to determine their importance; and all this in view of the end being sought. This is the crux of the problem; the preponderance of a good effect over an evil effect, which is required by the theory of the double effect, should not be established, according to these ethicists, according to any material or temporal succession, but according to the proportional calculation of the effects. The intention of the subject is good if he performs an action whose effects are preponderantly good; it will be evil if he wishes to perform an action whose effects are for the most part evil. "Proportionalism" insists upon the proportionately serious reason which can make an action contrary to the moral law acceptable.

The Nature of Moral Judgment

The gravity of the problem arises firstly from the fact that the judgment of human actions is transferred to the level of a kind of technical calculation of effects, which precede morality and have therefore been called "pre-moral," "ontic," or "physical" goods (or evils) such as health, bodily integrity, material goods. Judgment about actions, as about contemporary ethical problems, is shifted to this plane in such a way that the properly so-called moral judgment is now no more than a consequence; the will chooses to perform an action which is judged technically to be good or evil,--or more precisely, "right" or "erroneous" rather than morally good or evil (in German a distinction is made between *Richtigkeit* and *Guteit*; in English, between rightness and goodness) (no. 75).

Furthermore, this process is not limited to the solution of difficult cases, as in casuistry, but can be applied to all human actions because of the diversity of their effects, and it will be effectively used in all the ethical questions being discussed today. It introduces a technical mentality into morality. This explains the success of the new system, and reveals its danger.

Intrinsically Evil Acts

The encyclical's critique of these theories is pertinent (nos. 76-80). According to the logic of this system there is no longer anything good or evil in itself, actions are neither good nor evil in themselves, nothing is "intrinsically evil." Morality becomes relative in view of effects, consequences and circumstances, and is ever changing as situations, environments, eras, and the limits of our knowledge change.

The encyclical puts its finger on the heart of the matter when it reminds us that the moral quality of an action stems first of all from its object, which renders it good or evil in itself, in such wise that no circumstance or intention can make an act that is evil in its object, good. I would like to clarify this by saying that the object should be understood in morality in a less material sense than present usage tends to do. It can perfectly well designate a person, as when we say for example that another person, or God, is the object of our love, that happiness is the object of our desire, or charity the object of our prayer. The object therefore signifies that upon which our action bears, whether a person or a thing, while circumstances designate secondary elements, as we might speak of attenuating circumstances. Furthermore the object,

on the moral plane, should be considered according to the order of finality which governs our activities and orders us to God as to our final end, which is, as we have said, "objective" in itself. For St. Thomas too, the object and the end are the essential factors in establishing the morality of an act, and not circumstances, which can merely increase or diminish its moral value (I a 2ae q. 18).

By its insistence upon the importance of the object of moral acts, the encyclical guarantees Christian moral realism. By its restoration of the value of finality, it contributes to the restoration of the dynamism of that morality.

Servais Pinckaers, O.P.
Institut de Theologie Morale
Fribourg, Switzerland

(Translated by Sr. Mary Thomas Noble, O.P.)