



Some Acts Are Intrinsicly Evil

We live in a world that by and large unconsciously accepts the false view that there are no such things as intrinsically evil acts. Saint John Paul II, in his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, summarized the Catholic and natural law position well. “[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.” The Ten Commandments provide a good starting point for the list of actions that are always sinful, such as intentional killing of innocent human beings, adultery, and perjury.

We must protect and promote the conviction that certain acts are intrinsically evil and can never be done licitly. The importance of objective moral standards has only grown as relativism and utilitarian thinking have become more widespread and as the tools of technology have become more powerful. It is *the* great temptation of individuals and ethicists to allow self-interest to cloud their moral reasoning. Adam and Eve almost immediately after the Fall attempted to rationalize the sinful choice they made. Too often, our fallen human nature tempts us to look for exceptions to firm rules of conduct. The first thing that most people say when told that murder is always wrong is *but...* “what about killing someone in self-defense?” etc.

If it was always crystal-clear what is ethical and what is not, especially in dire circumstances, there would be no need for ethicists or moral theologians. Sadly, ethical dilemmas are all too common today. The need for expert bioethical analysis has grown tremendously in our era of constant progress in biomedical technologies and widespread cultural confusion about the fundamental truths concerning the human person.

It is quite true that in many ethical dilemmas, the circumstances are a key consideration in determining the ethics of an action. Nevertheless, St. John Paul II and the Catholic moral tradition are very clear that no extenuating circumstances can make a bad action morally good or neutral. “If acts are intrinsically evil, a good intention or particular circumstances can diminish their evil, but they cannot remove it.” (*Veritatis Splendor* # 81) Special circumstances can make a person less culpable and reduce the gravity of the sin, but, for example, a direct abortion remains intrinsically evil even if done to save the life of the mother.

Does this mean that the Catholic Church would force a mother to sacrifice her life for her preborn baby as some feminists affirm? The ethical dilemmas involved in maternal–fetal vital conflicts are some of the thorniest faced by bioethicists, but the short answer is that everything must be done to save both the mother and child. When that is not possible, and after all reasonable means have been considered, effective treatments to heal the mother can be chosen that do not involve the direct killing of the child. The [Principle of Double Effect](#) is usually employed in these cases to find a moral solution because it helps us to be clear about our intentions and the means used. All double effect reasoning is based on the premise that one may never do something evil in order to obtain a good end.

The intention of the person performing the action (the moral agent) is also extremely important in evaluating an act. A bad intention on the part of an individual can render an otherwise good action sinful. An example of this might be participation in a public Mass by a person whose purpose is not to pray or to nourish his soul but rather to give the false impression he is pious and holds to Catholic teachings so that he might obtain some kind of worldly benefit. Most importantly for our discussion, however, a good intention can never change the morality of an intrinsically evil act. Euthanasia or “Mercy Killing” is a prime example of a good intention, namely, to end the suffering of a dying person, that is nevertheless ethically unacceptable. The action of deliberately and directly killing a patient is contrary to Catholic morality and the medical ethics principle of “first do no harm.”

One of the reasons The National Catholic Bioethics Center (NCBC) is of vital importance today is the depth of our ethical expertise. We have six full-time ethicists and several more working part-time with us, who all refuse to compromise on objective moral standards. These basic foundational ethical truths were previously widely held even in the secular academic community. Unfortunately, some bioethicists today spend much of their time writing “permission slips” for unethical medical research or actions in hospitals. Typically, they deny that an action is intrinsically evil or say that a “greater good” can come from, say, research on organs taken from aborted babies.

Once one no longer reasons from the objective reality of intrinsically evil acts, ordinary people and academics can easily find themselves condoning terrible things. Usually this begins by justifying unethical behavior when faced with “hard cases” such as dangerous pregnancies. Without objective moral standards to rely on, ethicists are tempted to create their own false ethical norms such as demanding absolute respect for autonomy.

Ultimately, the human tendency to deny intrinsic evils undermines our ability to acknowledge objective truth. Pope Benedict XVI warned that relativism attacks this basic premise for ethics. “[A large proportion](#) of contemporary philosophies, in fact, consist of saying that man is not capable of truth. But viewed in that way, man would not be capable of ethical values, either. Then he would have no standards.” The clear risk is that morality devolves into an intolerable situation of the powerful determining what is right or wrong because unchecked moral relativism would lead to chaos. But if there is no objective basis for declaring some things intrinsically evil, we are at the mercy of those who would impose a false morality.