

## Catholicism 101

### Morality

The last session covered the topic of sin. For most people, sinful behaviors are quite obvious and easy to deduce. Although this is somewhat true, morality is another issue. The subject of morality answers the question: what ought I to do? How should I act? What is the right thing to do? Although the subject of morality is quite complex with many different ideas and systems for deducing right action, this session focuses on the Catholic Church's approach for morality.

#### Basics of morality

The morality of an action can be reduced to three parts: action, intention, and circumstances. From these three parts, we can deduce the moral weight of an action as well as form all the other moral systems.

**Action:** action asks the question: what did the person do? In order to determine whether someone acted morally, the person needed to do an action. We cannot assume the immorality or morality of something that didn't happen. Neither do hypothetical or supposed actions have moral weight. Thus, our starting point for discussing morality is to examine actions. The action is the thing the person did. Did the person stab someone, take something, or is the situation more complex? The most important part in understanding the action is to be clear with our language, refrain from judgment, and to be descriptive of the action. Described actions such as cheating, lying, or murdering already have moral weight. Instead we would say breaking the rules, speaking falsely, or killing. This part can be tricky. The action itself is important for determining the moral weight. If the action is immoral, then the person's action is immoral. If the action is morally good or neutral, then we can further assess the morality of the action. Hence, it is important to refrain from judgement when addressing the action taken by the person so to give the best description free of judgement.

Example 1: a person is walking along with a knife in their hand, trips and falls into another person and stabs them to death. Action: trips and falls or stabs a person.

Example 2: while taking a test, a student, while trying to think of the answer, idly looks over and sees the answer on another student's paper. Action: looking at another student's paper or letting one's eyes wander.

Example 3: While at the grocery store, a person goes to empty the cart on the conveyor belt and left some items in the cart. Action: left items in the cart or found items in the cart.

**Intention:** If the action is considered good or neutral, then we can ask the intention behind the action. Intentions are important. We can do good actions with ill intent just as much as we can do evil actions with good intentions. Sometimes the intentions are not clear. The hardest part of judging intentions is that we cannot fully know the intentions of another person without asking or allowing them to explore this topic. For us, however, this part of our moral equation is very helpful. Why did I do that? What was I think about when I did that? In the above actions we can apply the same level of scrutiny with varying results. If the action and intention are both good,

then the action is moral. If the action and intention are morally neutral, we examine the circumstances. If the action is good but the intention is evil, then the action is immoral. If the action is evil but the intention is good, then the action is immoral.

Example 1: a person is walking along with a knife in their hand trips and falls into another person and stabs them to death. Intention: to idly stab the person with a knife, clumsily walk with a knife, to go and return the knife to the sink for washing,

Example 2: while taking a test, a student, while trying to think of the answer, idly looks over and sees the answer on another student's paper. Intention: to take a break from the test or to look at the other student's paper without being noticed.

Example 3: While at the grocery store, a person goes to empty the cart on the conveyor belt and left some items in the cart. Intention: absent-mindedly was not paying attention or to steal from the store.

Circumstances. The final category for addressing the morality of action is circumstances. Circumstances govern all the other details and situations that surround and color our actions. These can be individual tendencies, perspectives on events, or the environment. The goal of evaluating the circumstances is to note situations that could have caused the unfortunate event but were outside the person's control. Circumstances also show us the reasons for the action and can color or clarify the intention. Sometimes circumstances can make a bad action done with good intentions moral.

Example 1: What if the floor was slippery causing the person to trip? What if the person was in a hurry or running while carrying the knife? What if they were playing a game involving running with knives?

Example 2: What if the person intentionally sits next to the smartest person in class? What if these tests were critically important for their job or education versus a practice or inconsequential test? What if the answers to the test were written on the board or team work was encouraged?

Example 3: What if the person was hungry or his family was starving? What if the person knew they couldn't afford the food? What if the person actually got those item for free due to a sale but forgot to tell the cashier?

### **Moral laws and systems:**

The Church doesn't teach one moral system nor require her adherents to follow one moral system. However, some moral systems are more in line with her moral teachings and the truths of Christianity than others. Below are some of the more common moral systems taught in the Catholic Church and which fit her doctrines.

Virtue Ethics: Virtue Ethics was developed by the Greek philosophers of the 4<sup>th</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC. The system follows from the virtues which are the proper way to act or govern one's life. Each virtue falls between two extremes with each extreme constitutive a vice. For instance, the virtue of courage falls in the middle between timidity and fool-hardy. Someone who is timid fails to act when action is needed. Someone who is fool-hardy acts too rashly when inaction is needed.

Someone who is courageous knows when to act and when not to given the circumstance. This simple example shows the challenges and limitations of virtue ethics. Whereas a moral system with laws would give specific actions which are always immoral, virtue ethics is based on the person and her circumstances. In the same situation one person could act courageously whereas another is too timid based on their skills and personality. This discrepancy between people causes challenges in determining right action. The goal of virtue ethics is to act in a virtuous manner in all actions and situations of life. A person becomes virtuous through examining their actions and learning how to act in each circumstance.

**Rule-based or deontological Ethics:** Rule-based ethics states that morality is governed by a set of rules or laws that apply to all people, times, and places. These rules are logically sound and everyone must obey the rules without qualification. The Church has a strong code of laws that govern not only the Church but also the people. These laws are a mix of laws that came from God through Scripture and laws that are extensions of God's laws to clarify situations in various times. The Church must have a set of general laws that govern all people since Christianity itself is based on law. Some examples of Church laws include the 10 Commandments, the Great Commandment, precepts of the faith, and laws that govern the Church. All of these forms of laws have varying degrees of morality. Whereas the 10 Commandments are set and eternal laws, Church laws can be changed when the situations warrant it. We, however, hold that God's laws are eternal. God doesn't change and therefore his laws don't change. We have some laws that govern all humanity and help us know right actions and those that violate God. Rule-based ethics are very easy to understand and follow. Follow the laws and you know what is right and wrong. Rule-based ethics has one fundamental problem: what happens when a good action with a good intention is deemed immoral based on the rules? Can a person steal from the store to save his starving family? Can a doctor cause harm to a patient to bring them healing?

**Natural Law:** Morality based on natural law is based on the idea that the universe and everything it is governed by laws and a purpose. The purpose of each thing governs its use and the morality of situations involving its use. For instance, our stomachs are used for our nourishment. Therefore we those foods which nourish our bodies are moral actions and those that cause harm to our bodies are immoral. Although this part of ethics is rarely taught in schools and universities today, the Church continues to use the premises and conclusions from natural law to guide her ethical stances. Natural law examines the way humans were created and meant to live as the core for the ethical system. What were our bodies created to do? How were we supposed to use our bodies? What is the natural world created for? This system requires a Creator who has a will and plan for creation in order to be an ethical system. This system presupposes that humans have a purpose and that our bodies and creation also have a purpose. Natural Law is invoked to explain sexual morality as well as our goal or purpose as humans.

**Addressing the Grey Area:**

No moral system is perfect. Each system will have limitations and challenges as we attempt to figure out the best course of action and live moral lives. The principles below help address issues arising from moral grey-areas.

The principle of double effect: The principle of double effect helps us to understand the morality of an action where bad effects come from good intentions. A couple examples help to clarify this principle. A doctor who operates on a patient. Technically, the action is bad because they are causing harm to the patient by cutting the person open. The intention is good because the doctor wants to bring healing to the patient. The bad effect is that the person is harmed but the harm leads to greater healing. Therefore the action is considered moral. Below are the conditions that help determine the application of the principle of double effect and the way to determine the morality of the action.

1. The act-in-itself cannot be intrinsically evil or morally wrong. We are never permitted to perform an immoral action even with a good result. Our actions must always be morally permissible for any principle of moral theology to apply.
2. The intention must be good. We can never intend an immoral action even though the result may be good.
3. The bad effect cannot cause the good. Many times we use the phrase “the ends justifies the means.” This is not true. If the action is immoral, then the ends are still colored by its immorality.

The good effects of the action must outweigh the bad effect of the action. This is called proportionality. We must always work towards greater good not greater evil.

Cooperation: Often we find ourselves in a situation where we didn't do the action but we had a part in it. For instance, I didn't rob the bank but I drove the getaway car. What level of moral culpability do I have? The principle of cooperation is broken into degrees of cooperation with the basic question: could the action have taken place if I didn't play my part? In the situation with the getaway car, I played an important but not vital role in the bank robbery. The robbery would have still taken place without me but I helped in the success. The terms we use are as following:

Material cooperation: I supplied the physical means through which the action was committed.

Formal cooperation: I was directly involved in the action.

Informal cooperation: I was tangentially involved with the action.

Remote cooperation: I had little to no involvement in the action and it would have happened regardless of what I did.

The closer a person is to the action, the more culpability the person has.