

## The Different Meanings of Human Acts: Part II

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March 17, 2009

In a previous essay I presented and criticized the consequentialist understanding of human acts central to the culture of death. Here I will set forth the true understanding of human acts central to the culture of life. This understanding, fully compatible with Christian faith, is also philosophically sound; it is the meaning of human acts undergirding “natural law.”

A central truth of the natural law and Christian revelation is that human persons have the power of free choice. According to revelation, God, in order to create a being with whom he could share his own life, created persons (angelic and human) who have the power to make or break their lives by their own free choices. He gave them this power because he wanted to give them the sublime gift of his own inner Triune life. But this could be a gift only if human persons were free to accept it; he could not force it on them. Human persons, whose bodies are integral to their being as persons, have thus been given the nature of beings inwardly open to the supernatural gift of divine life. And the Triune God who created them has in fact willed to enter into covenant with them and to give them this great gift. That human persons have the power to make free choices is also philosophically demonstrable (on this see Germain Grisez, Joseph Boyle, Olaf Tollefsen, *Free Choice*, 1976)).

The power of free choice is clearly affirmed by Scripture, the Fathers of the Church, and the whole Catholic tradition. Throughout his Encyclical *Veritatis splendor* Pope John Paul II emphasized the significance of human acts as self-determining. A particularly illuminating text is the following: “Human acts are moral acts because they express and determine the goodness or evil of the individual who performs them. They do not produce a change merely in the state of affairs outside of man, but, to the extent that they are deliberate choices [emphasis added], they give moral definition to the very person who performs them, determining his profound spiritual traits. This was perceptively noted by St. Gregory of Nyssa: ‘All things subject to change and to becoming never remain constant, but continually pass from one state to another, for better or worse...Now, human life is always subject to change; it needs to be born ever anew...But here birth does not come about by a foreign intervention, as is the case with bodily beings...; it is the result of a free choice [emphasis added]. Thus we are, in a certain sense, our own parents, creating ourselves as we will, by our decision’” (no. 71; the internal citation, from St. Gregory of Nyssa, is from his *De Vita Moysis*, 2,3).

Free choice makes morality possible and renders us responsible for our actions and our lives. It is the existential principle or source of morality because moral good and moral evil depend for their being on the power of free choice. What we do is our doing only if we freely choose to do what we do, and it can be evil doing or its opposite only if we freely choose to do it.



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**Free choice, human action, and a person’s moral being**

Free choices bear on actions that we can do. But these actions are not physical events in the material world that come and go, like the falling of rain or the turning of the leaves. They are not “things” that merely “happen” to a person. Our actions, of course, “get things done,” i.e., have consequences or effects in the external world. But human actions, precisely as chosen freely and self-determining, are much more than this. They are, rather, the expression of a person’s choice, the disclosure or revelation of that person’s moral identity. At the core of an action, as human and personal, is a free, self-determining choice, which as such is something spiritual and abides within the person, determining the person’s very being.

The Scriptures, particularly the New Testament, are very clear about this. Jesus taught that it is not what enters a person that defiles him or her; rather, it is what flows from the person, from his or her heart, from his or her choice (see Matt 15:10-20; Mk 7:14-23). We can say that a human action—i.e., a free, intelligible action, whether good or bad—is the adoption by choice of some intelligible proposal and the execution of this choice through some exterior performance. But the core of this action is the free, self-determining choice that abides in the person, making him or her to be the kind of person he or she is. Thus, I become an adulterer, as Jesus clearly taught (Matt 5:28), when I look at a woman with lust, i.e., when I adopt by choice the proposal to commit adultery with her or to think with satisfaction about doing so, even if I am prevented from executing this choice externally. The execution of the choice to commit adultery increases the malice of my act, but even if the choice is not for some reason executed, I have still, by my own free choice, made myself to be an adulterer.

This illustrates the self-determining character of free choice. It is in and through the actions we freely choose to do that we give to ourselves our identity as moral beings, for weal or for woe. This identity abides in us until we make other, contradictory kinds of choices. Thus, if I choose to commit adultery, I make myself to be an adulterer, and I remain an adulterer, internally disposed to commit adultery, until, by another free and self-determining choice, I have a change of heart and repent of my deed. I am then a repentant adulterer, one determined, through free choice and with the help of God’s never-failing grace, to amend my life and to be a faithful, loving spouse.

Indeed, our character or identity as moral beings, can be properly identified as “the integral existential identity of the person—the entire person in all his or her dimensions as shaped by morally good and bad choices—considered as a disposition to further choices.” (see Germain Grisez, *Christian Moral Principles*, p. 59).

**Morally Specifying Freely Chosen Human Acts**

Consequentialism holds that human acts are morally specified as good or evil by the good or bad consequences that they bring about. We saw that this approach simply ignores or conceals what the act chosen does here and now and focuses attention on its “hoped-for” benefits, whose realization depends on further human acts and/or unforeseen events.



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The true understanding of human acts as freely chosen holds that human acts are specified primarily by the “object” chosen here and now. John Paul II, following the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas and other exponents of natural law, put matters this way: “*The morality of the human act depends primarily and fundamentally on the "object" rationally chosen by the deliberate will...* In order to be able to grasp the object of an act which specifies that act morally, it is therefore necessary to place oneself in the perspective of the acting person. The object of the act of willing is in fact a freely chosen kind of behavior. To the extent that it is in conformity with the order of reason, it is the cause of the goodness of the will; it perfects us morally, and disposes us to recognize our ultimate end in the perfect good, primordial love. By the object of a given moral act, then, one cannot mean a process or an event of the merely physical order, to be assessed on the basis of its ability to bring about a given state of affairs in the outside world. Rather, that object is the proximate end of a deliberate decision which determines the act of willing on the part of the acting person” (*Veritatis Splendor*, 78).

There are some acts, specified by the object freely chosen, that simply cannot be ordered to God. They cannot do so because they violate the “goods” of the human person, goods such as life itself and health and the handing of life, bodily integrity, friendship, knowledge of the truth and goods of this kind. These are what we know as “intrinsically evil” acts that are never to be done (see *ibid*, 80). St. Thomas and John Paul II emphasized that we offend God only by acting contrary to our own good (for St. Thomas see *Summa Contra Gentes*, Bk 3, ch. 122; for John Paul see *Veritatis splendor*, 13, 80). The supreme moral norm, expressed in religious language, is that we are to love God above all things and our neighbor as ourselves. And we love our neighbor only if we will that the goods perfective of human persons flourish in them and are unwilling intentionally to choose actions whose object is to damage, destroy, or impede these goods either in ourselves or in others.

It is for this reason that intentionally killing innocent persons, such as unborn human babies, killing people “mercifully,” and other such deeds are always gravely immoral.

**The Significance of Self-Determining Actions on Persons and Societies:  
Fundamental Commitments and Moral Reasoning**

A very important passage from Vatican Council II’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*, 27), in which the Council unequivocally condemned as gravely immoral all actions opposed to life itself, such as abortion, infanticide, etc., declared that such acts not only “poison human society” and “are a supreme dishonor to the Creator,” but also “do more harm to those who practice them than those who suffer from the injury.” This is a remarkable statement, and if one says this to a parent whose infant girl has been violently raped the parent may at first find it offensive. But it is true. It is true because, as we have seen, we make ourselves to be the kind of persons we are in and through the choices we make and that these choices abide in us as dispositions to make further choices of the same kind until we freely choose to make new kinds of choices incompatible with them.



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Moreover, some of our choices are in the form of “commitments.” As John Paul II noted, “Emphasis has rightly been placed on the importance of certain choices which ‘shape’ a person's entire moral life, and which serve as bounds within which other particular everyday choices can be situated and allowed to develop” (*Veritatis Splendor*, 65). We can call these choices “commitments.” The most fundamental choice of a Christian is his baptismal commitment. This “qualifies the moral life and engages freedom on a radical level before God. It is a question of the decision of faith, of the obedience of faith (cf. Rom 16:26) ‘by which man makes a total and free self-commitment to God, offering “the full submission of intellect and will to God as he reveals”[112] This faith, which works through love (cf. Gal 5:6), comes from the core of man, from his ‘heart’ (cf. Rom 10:10), whence it is called to bear fruit in works (cf. Mt 12:33-35; Lk 6:43-45; Rom 8:5-10; Gal 5:22) (ibid., 66). The Christian, because of this commitment, obliges himself to integrate every choice of his life into this fundamental commitment; if he does so he will become the saint he is called to be. A similar commitment is the marital commitment; husbands and wives, by committing themselves to one another in marriage, oblige themselves to integrate within this great commitment their everyday choices.

Because of the way they understand human acts, consequentialists fail to recognize the self-determining nature of free choice and the way that certain “commitments” can make it impossible to recognize good moral arguments. Those who defend the practices characteristic of the culture of death, e.g., the Obama administration and pro-abortion Catholic politicians, have made a basic commitment in which they dedicate themselves to ensure that women have the “right” to abort their own children, to kill embryonic human persons in order to obtain their stem cells, etc. Because of their basic commitment, these persons simply cannot grasp arguments against the practices of culture of death. A hallowed medieval axiom was “whatever is received is received in the mode of the recipient”: (*quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur*). But as we have seen, it is in and through our choices, in particular, choices that can be called “commitments,” that we make ourselves to be the “receivers” that we are. And one who is committed to the culture of death agenda has made himself to be the kind of person who cannot “receive” arguments defending views incompatible with that commitment. In order to be open to, receptive of, such arguments, a true *metanoia*, a change of heart, is needed.

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