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MORALITY AND INTRINSIC EVIL

THOMAS A. WASSMER, S.J.*

MOST STUDENTS OF ETHICS understand early why the concept of sin is not introduced into a course of philosophical ethics. They know that sin is a theological term referring to a state of separation from God by an inordinate turning to a creature. The dual formality of an aversion from God (*aversio a Deo*) and a conversion or turning inordinately to a creature (*conversio ad creaturam*) is recognized to be present in every sin. The students easily understand how wrongdoing is a turning away from good and, in some way, a turning away from ultimate Good or God, but they raise many objections to the inclusion within this notion of turning away from God any reference to offending Him, displeasing Him, or injuring Him. They have problems with reconciling wrongdoing with injury to God. They accept this theologically but seem to urge the detachment of the God of Deism when they reflect on the possible consequences of their evil acts in relation to the Divine. What possible harm to God can be done by our wrongdoing?

They see early in philosophical ethics that sin is a difficult term to introduce into the course and they accept in its place the concept of moral evil. But here, precisely, is the rub. If traditional Thomistic texts in philosophical ethics omit the term sin and readily adopt the term moral evil, non-Thomistic texts seem to give slight attention even to moral evil, employ it infrequently and, in many cases, ignore it altogether. Why is the term moral evil not used more often and considered more profoundly than it is in philosophical ethics?

Professor A.E. Taylor puts his finger on this inadequate treatment of the problem of moral evil and says that it is the outstanding defect of philosophical treatises on ethics. He points out that most writers on the subject seem to think that they have done all that is expected of them when they have tried to tell us what the good for man is, and what virtue, or the moral law, demands of us. The concern is with a

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theory of good and little more; writers may set before us a "theory of good and evil" but the student will have to be satisfied with the perfunctory consideration given to moral evil. The influential *Principia Ethica* of G.E. Moore barely mentions the term. It might not be going too far to say that, of the principal philosophers who have dealt expressly and at length with the moral life of man (independent of a theological tradition), there are only two, Plato and Kant, whose language reveals an acute and constant sense of human evil. Professor Taylor denies that this interest in the problem of moral evil can be found in Aristotle, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibnitz, or Hegel. He finds it not prominent in even such vigorous supporters of an "eternal and immutable" morality as Cudworth, Clarke, and Price. Throughout the history of moral philosophy there is the paradox of a preoccupation by so many thinkers with the problem of the good while reducing almost to relative unimportance the agonizing problem of moral evil.

Just briefly let us consider once again G.E. Moore for whom the basic problem in ethics upon which all others depend is the meaning of good in its intrinsic sense. The intrinsic sense of good is the one in which if a thing is good in that sense "it would be a good thing that the thing in question should exist, even if it existed quite alone" without any further accompaniments or effects whatever. What then does intrinsic good mean? The fact is that intrinsic good cannot be defined; it is a simple, unique, irreducible characteristic, it can be known only immediately or intuitively. The knowledge of the goodness of a thing is directly apprehended when the thing is known, if it is apprehended

at all. This does not mean that there is a special faculty by which good is known, and it does not mean that one cannot be mistaken in judgments of value; but it does mean that such questions as whether or not, and to what extent, a thing is good are in no sense subject to argument or capable of being clarified by reasoning. Propositions to the effect that something is intrinsically good are not debatable: "No relevant evidence can be adduced: from no other truth, except from themselves, can it be inferred that they are either true or false."

This is just a capsule summary of the notion of intrinsic good to Moore. He barely mentions evil in his *Principia Ethica* but there is more than mere mention of evil in the traditional Thomistic texts on ethics. In fact, where Moore was primarily interested in the intrinsic good, the Thomistic ethicist leads many students to believe that his primary interest is in moral evil and frequently in intrinsic evil. It is here that I come to the heart of my reflections on philosophical ethics and moral evil. Let me put it this way. The Thomistic moral philosopher finds it easier, it appears, to define intrinsic evil than to discover satisfactory examples to illustrate the definition. It should make the moralist reflect on whether it is not unwise to denominate some moral act intrinsically evil without fearing that he may possibly have painted himself into a corner. To retreat from this position requires some delicate footwork.

This calls for some elaboration. Let me explain why it appears to me that the term intrinsic evil is not a viable term in moral philosophy and why it causes more problems than it attempts to solve or even to explain adequately. I shall try to defend

this position by considering the meaning of "intrinsically evil" and then by examining the representative acts which are usually designated as intrinsically evil.

An act is considered to be intrinsically evil if, viewed just from its moral object, prescind from circumstances and motive, it is always in difformity with the proximate norm which is rational human nature. The moral object of an act is that relationship which it bears to the norm of morality. The object of an act is the *whatness* of the act. For example, homicide has a different moral object than murder; fornication has a different moral object than adultery. If the act is regarded solely from its object and found to be repugnant to rational human nature (adequately considered), then such an act is characterized as intrinsically evil. The object of most acts, or to phrase it more precisely, most acts, viewed just from their objects, prescind from circumstances and motive are morally indifferent. Walking, smoking, even killing are morally indifferent acts considered just from their objects. It is only when walking is done under certain circumstances and with this or that motive that it acquires the moral dimension of being either morally good or morally bad. Likewise, it is only when smoking is done in excess by someone whose health may become endangered that the act assumes a moral dimension of good or bad. Incidentally, this latter example provides a rash of problems because, while smoking in excess may involve consequences upon physical health, there is no doubt that it provides psychologically good consequences which may well be intended to counterbalance the possible harmful consequences to physical health.

The last example cited above, of homi-

cide, is a more interesting one to consider. Homicide, the killing of a man—just this act, viewed from its object—is morally indifferent. It requires the addition of several factors to become an act morally evil. Not every homicide is the same. Which circumstances have to be added to homicide to constitute an act of murder? These are circumstances that are required even to constitute the physical integrity of the act of murder, but what is interesting, is that these very circumstances that change a mere act of homicide into an act of murder also are the circumstances that change the moral object of indifference to a moral object of evil. What is added to homicide to make a case of murder? Here is where the moral philosopher becomes even more technical and begins to add elements that almost inflate the original moral object of mere homicide. What is murder for the moralist?

Murder for many moralists is unjust killing of another man. What really does this mean? When spelled out it becomes this expanded definition which, as John Hospers says, dilutes the original moral rule "do not kill" almost into a tautology. This is the articulated meaning for unjust killing or murder: *the direct killing of another man on one's own authority outside a case of legitimate self-defense. Direct killing refers to the act of killing intended as an end or as a means to an end and on one's own authority means that one is exercising right over another person's life which he does not have. By the inclusion of self-defense within the definition, the definer surely wants to exclude from murder the act of killing the assailant. But what happens if someone considers it just for a society to exercise capital punishment? In order to exclude capital punish-*

ment as an act of murder when the criminal is killed, does this not compel the advocate of the above definition to include this exception? Murder then assumes this definition: the direct killing of another man on one's own authority outside a case of legitimate self-defense and capital punishment. If anyone wants to designate this moral act with its expanded, articulated object, an act morally wrong, he will receive wide acceptance in western society. However, suppose this definition is offered to the pacifist who takes the moral rule not to kill literally; suppose it is submitted to the Hindu who extends the prohibition against taking life to all forms of life; suppose it is submitted to Dr. Schweitzer?

Now, I do not quarrel with the fact that there is general acceptance in many quarters of the definition of murder. What I do suggest is that murder has been so defined that it excludes everything that we regard as not exercises of murder and it is here that some moralists with one constellation of values will add or subtract cases and other moralists with a different constellation of values will add or subtract other cases. If then, for us, murder is defined as it was above—direct killing of another man on one's own authority outside a case of legitimate self-defense and capital punishment—and if this act of murder is then considered to be merely evil from its object, intrinsically evil from its object, just how viable has this notion of intrinsically evil become? Viable for all who accept, but not viable for those who dissent from, our own constellation of values, our own value system.

This speculation on the problems that arise from any designation of an act to be intrinsically evil can be extended to in-

clude a consideration of similar problems in the cases of suicide, lying, and sterilization. It seems to lead to the conclusion that the moral philosopher must struggle to develop the most authentic meaning for murder, suicide, lying and sterilization, but after he has constructed such a moral act, he should be very hesitant to designate it as intrinsically evil. Why is this so? Because by characterizing this act with all of its qualifications as intrinsically evil, he has little ground on which to move unless he is willing to re-examine each of the qualifications and admit that the definition is malleable. The problem with the person who readily designates an act to be intrinsically evil is that he will tolerate very little modification within the definition of the moral act as he proposes it. In fact, does not the very term *intrinsic evil* seem to imply that modifications are not in order? However, any student of the history of ethics knows well that modifications are very much in order arising from a more penetrating knowledge of human nature and the complexities of the human act.

An examination of most texts in ethics will reveal a general reluctance to refer to any act as intrinsically evil. Most books mention blasphemy and stop there; others dishonesty, infidelity and dishonor, but these latter are really dodging the issue because they do not specify the very moral act which *is* an act of dishonesty, infidelity or dishonor. Any moral act can be built up into something approaching the notion of intrinsic evil if we construct upon the simple moral object of the act a variety of circumstances and motives which will alter its moral species from moral indifference to moral evil. But how far does this construction have to go before we are sure

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that the moral act is intrinsically evil?

Take sterilization as a further example. Sterilization in itself is morally indifferent; indirect therapeutic sterilization in the presence of a pathological disorder is morally good; direct punitive sterilization would be acceptable to anyone who accepts the De Lugo position on the lawfulness of direct killing of an aggressor in the case of legitimate self-defense. If the De Lugo position warrants direct killing of a criminal in these circumstances, then a fortiori, direct sterilization of a criminal can be allowed because to intend directly the death of the man himself is something more serious than to intend directly the mutilation of his generative system. The further problem with the moral dimension of sterilization is the formidable question involved in the controversy over the anovulants: if the anovulant results in a

sterilization (temporary), may such a sterilization be *directly* intended in the absence of a pathological condition such as menorrhagia, dysmenorrhea, or an irregular menstrual cycle? In other words, may this kind of sterilization be intended as a means for the further good of marital intimacy and in the presence of serious psychological reasons? To say that direct sterilization is always wrong, to say that indirect sterilization is licit only in the presence of a *physical* pathological condition, is to narrow the area of moral dialogue.

More can be said and should be said about the non-viability of the concept of intrinsic evil. It is hoped that these reflections will stimulate some further discussion on the problem of moral evil in general and on the prudent unwillingness to characterize any moral act as intrinsically evil. "Intrinsically evil," applied too freely, can place an albatross around the neck of the user.