

Introduction

A CAUTIONARY TALE

CHRISTIAN AND ESPECIALLY CATHOLIC MORALS TEXTS HAVE PROLIFERATED over the past half dozen years. Publishers and professors alike want to move the discussion of morality beyond the Scylla and Charybdis of musty seminary manuals and oversimplistic texts for lay students, many of whom have been labeled baptized nonbelievers because of their lack of background in the religion of their heritage. Serious people understand how important the moral life is to Christian living. Faith without works, faith that does nothing in practice, the Epistle of James asserts, is “thoroughly lifeless” (2:17).

This book is the result of over three decades of teaching both undergraduate and graduate classes in moral decision making. It is the product of sorting the important from the interesting but nonessential. It is a practical rather than a theological work. It is a sparse overview from one person’s experience and selection rather than a thorough treatment of all aspects of Catholic moral thinking. While there is a place for parsing the finer points of theological thought on morality or the mining of all possible theological sources for ethics, my sole aim is to present a useful text for undergraduate and graduate students who are serious about their moral lives—or wish to be. Many will find it an iconoclastic work, perhaps outside the mainstream of many Christian morals texts. The first several chapters may read like an apologia for relativism. As a card-carrying Catholic, I take seriously the importance of

normative morals and for standards against which to measure behavior. I have a zealous devotion to the church and its moral tradition. Nevertheless, I know how difficult it is to reach clarity, certainty, or agreement on moral issues. People of goodwill come to decision making from different philosophies and different experiences. While diversity does not guarantee moral rightness, these exigencies affect how people make decisions. The book does not propose to offer *right* answers to moral dilemmas, much less *Catholic* answers. Its only purpose is to lay out one plausible methodology to arrive at *good* answers, to suggest some substantive sources and formative matrices for the moral person. It is about moral choice.

If readers are looking for certitude under a sheltering Catholic umbrella raised to shield them from ambiguity and to guarantee clarity in all things moral, this is not the text for them. However, if readers are open to many sources of moral wisdom, they should read on. If they can achieve a level of comfort not with certitude but with the reliability of reason and the power of grace—both strongly affirmed in Catholic moral tradition—they have found a helpful resource. Those who use the book for their courses should feel free, even encouraged, to add to or subtract from the content. Each chapter is distilled to fit the limits of time and space, much like cans of frozen concentrated orange juice. This leaves the individual reader or professor free to add whatever is needed to bring the mix to its proper potency. The book is brief enough that it need not be the only resource for a semester class. I recommend that the last portion of any course in morality be devoted to applying method to specific moral issues, perhaps by student groups. This exercise allows students to understand how they themselves make decisions, to test their conclusions on real moral issues against collected wisdom from church and culture, and to practice the moral decision-making skills they have learned. The last chapter begins this conversation.

Many people, dissatisfied with lives offering only limited and fleeting happiness, yearn for meaning. “What’s it all about, Alfie? Is it just for the moment that we live?” asks the author of a popular movie theme song of the film’s major character.¹ “I know there’s something much more, something even non-believers can believe in.” A life missing reflection and purpose is an unsatisfying life. As Alfie discovers, human beings long for more than the moment, for purpose, for meaning, for “making something of ourselves.”

Moral decision making is *how* people make themselves into something. It is one of the most important and challenging tasks that life presents. In life's incremental decisions, we express who we are and create who we will become. We move beyond a purposeless life to establish something real and lasting. If someone wishes to be a moral person, his or her values are played out in the serious decisions of daily life. The person seeking to become a truthful person speaks the truth; she studies for the exam rather than cheating to pass; she pays debts and returns borrowed property. If someone wishes to be generous, he uses his time and talent not for financial gain but for the common good. He does not hoard possessions; he shares them.

This book is written for the serious moral decision maker. Its aim is to reach upper division undergraduates, those in Catholic Studies programs and ministry programs, and perhaps the serious person in the pew. While the book flows from a Catholic perspective, Catholicism has long claimed that moral rightness is universal, discoverable value. Catholic moral wisdom, often articulated in church documents, is not generally a parochial set of rules meant just for Catholics. Rather, the tradition draws frequently on other religious traditions as well as secular human experience to offer guidelines for behavior that are believed to be for all people. Often Catholic teaching reflects good common sense.

I hope to offer the best of the past of Catholic tradition and the possibility for its future. I hope to explain the differences between what is uniquely Catholic or Christian and what is universal. The model proposed is unapologetically Christian. Certainly it is not the only possible model. Those who believe they come from dust and end in dust cannot embrace such hubris!

Ultimately each of us has a choice: we can live a life of unconnected events like the two-dimensional characters colorfully portrayed in cartoons; or we can choose to *be* someone, to stand for something. What is our personal legacy? What do we want people to say of us at the end of our lives? As the psalmist says, "[Human beings'] days are like those of grass; the wind sweeps over [them] and [they] are gone" (Ps. 103). At the end of our lives, is that all there is?

Outline of the Book

In some sense, moral decision making begins outside the person. There are external sources for moral *content* such as story, law, even pressures from

various familial, cultural, and religious elements. The religion into which a person is born, the place in history he or she occupies, the influences of family and friends—all contribute to the personal moral reality each human being internalizes and carries with him or her. This deposit of moral wisdom becomes a part of what we call the personal *moral iceberg*. Chapter 1 considers these sources. It outlines a specifically Catholic heritage, what comes to each believer from the religious framework of identity, tradition, community. We call these contributions and others that originate outside the person the *objective culture*.

Chapter 2 explores more deeply the place of narrative in decision making. It offers one perspective on how to appropriate the Christian narrative. There are different theologies of what the Christ event means. Many emphasize the saving aspect of God's intervention into human history, particularly the sacrificial nature of the crucifixion. Some see Jesus primarily as a moral teacher, offering clear guidelines for the moral life. Some see relationship with Christ as more individualistic than communal. This book offers a different vision. For a Christian, a fundamental intimacy with Christ can support and inspire both the attitudinal and content components of the moral life. The ubiquitous and generous offer of relationship with Christ, illustrated here by the Gospel of John, grounds the person prior, during, and after the decision-making process. Like the beloved spouse in a good marriage, it remains a constant in a world of tectonic moral shift. It places the person in an evolving tradition within the community of the church. This community offers continuity with the foundational event (the coming of Jesus as the Christ) as well as evaluative commentary on new insights that arise in the course of history.

Chapter 3 revisits the traditional moral methods that privilege reason as the primary moral tool for assessing the rightness of actions. Many see reason as more universal than any particular religious or cultural tradition. Attempting to overcome parochial visions of moral rightness in a diverse world, reason is viewed by many as the Esperanto (a nineteenth-century attempt at a universal language) of morality. Unfortunately, as postmodern infatuation with reason has demonstrated, this tool does not offer *content*—what actual deeds are moral. Rather, it provides only *method*, or *process*—how moral decisions are made. Personal moral method shapes *how* each human being applies to particular decisions the standards and values that they hold. It does not offer

a clear set of stories, values, or norms that articulate the good. Even so, the Catholic tradition has long held that reason, a universal element in the very nature of human beings, can be a reliable tool for decision making.

Chapter 4 addresses additional sources for moral content. The extended objective culture provides more than the personal heritage discussed in chapter 1. It provides more than the seminal Christian insight of chapter 2. Content is drawn from civil and religious laws, which formalize rules for human behavior in societies and/or in a particular religious context. Content is available in narratives beyond a person's usual experience. Even the seemingly predictable Catholic tradition evolves, much like a snowball that continues to grow, to pick up "stuff," and to change as it is rolled across the white blanketed ground on the way to becoming a snowman. The chapter offers some insight into the psychology and physiology of persons, which affect their moral abilities and perhaps distorts how content is affected.

Chapter 5 suggests a normative standard for decision making that meets the challenges set up in earlier chapters. With so many conflicting voices offering a perspective on what is right, with a variety of processes that reason offers, it is difficult to decide what to do. This chapter suggests a useful norm for the moral person, one that draws from a Catholic context but is useful for anyone. This standard comes from the Vatican II document *Gaudium et spes* (The Church In the Modern World). *Gaudium et spes* details a thick description of the human person and then uses this thick description to articulate a universal criterion against which to judge human actions both personal and collective. The human person adequately considered is both the *source* of, and the *standard* for, moral action. It is consistent and flexible.

Chapter 6 locates the discussions of the first five chapters in the character and actions of a moral actor, in what we shall call the moral iceberg. It looks at the internal and external workings of the conscience: what conscience is, how it is developed, formed, and nourished. Conscience is more than simply being "conscious" of what one does as right or wrong. It provides the personal referent in which a person stores significant stories, values, and norms that shape behavior. It is the moral mechanism that *directs* the acting person and ultimately *forms* the person through his or her actions. It has to do with who a person *is* as well as what a person *does*. The last part of the chapter takes up the questions of sin and guilt. As modern psychology demonstrates how

susceptible human beings are to suggestion, to physical and external conditions, and to other factors, it is necessary to consider whether such traditional terms as *sin* and *guilt* have any meaning in today's world.

Chapter 7 presents an easy seven-step process for making decisions. In a series of focused questions, it offers "steps for moral decision making" that are applicable to any moral dilemma. They strip away the nonessential elements of what can be a difficult process to focus on the important ones. Students can use these steps for discussions of cases or to dissect complex moral issues.

Chapter 8 offers some decidedly Catholic perspectives on common moral issues. Sadly, the romp through these issues is necessarily truncated. The chapter's aim is meant only to prime the pump for student discussion and reflection. Common arguments on the issues are addressed. While the offerings will reflect more than one theological perspective, they dialogue primarily with traditional Catholic teaching. Catholics will want to use these addenda to inform their own decisions. Those from other traditions can use them to understand the reasoning and context of Catholic teaching. Included in the text are a glossary, a list of narrative sources (movies, books, and other sources), a list of cases, and an index.

If one were to summarize the book, its contents might be condensed to a single diagram, the iceberg described in chapter 6. All the topics treated in the earlier chapters can be assembled into this one coherent image. The book's goal is to present a challenge to readers to see themselves as moral persons, to understand how they make decisions, and to consider a Catholic Christian vision for their own decisions and their own life's work.

In the marvelous Henrik Ibsen play *Peer Gynt*, the main character destroys his very self because he continually avoids decisions that will define his personhood. He runs away from his wife, his dying mother, any responsibilities that disturb or challenge him. Late in the play, the author suggests that Peer is like an onion: layer upon layer with no core. He has never taken on the responsibility that is essential to the creation of a true human being. He has never truly become a person. This book hopes to offer the reader an alternative vision of human potential to that of Peer Gynt.

There is a line in 1 Corinthians in which the author promises to give the reader the key to the perfect moral life: "But I shall show you a still more excellent way" (12:31). We have heard the passage again and again, often

at weddings. It foreshadows what the relationship of marriage could be. It testifies to what a good life entails. The author tells the reader that love is patient, kind, not jealous (13:4). He continues with a litany of all the characteristics—we might call them virtues—that a good person embodies. In the final analysis, though, Paul's list is a lexicon of hope rather than a litany of accomplishment. The end product, a person who embodies all these qualities of the "higher things," must work out the details in a life of growth. Any litany of hope and possibility carries with it ambiguity. Unfortunately, the same is true of this book. It offers no answers. In the end, it offers one possible path and pattern to find those answers. Persons ultimately must choose a path toward self-creation. For each, the path is universal; it is also unique. Every person must stand before God and self to answer the question: have I become a person?