

II. Intrinsically Evil Acts as a *Sine Qua Non* of Virtue Ethics

Since the early 1980s, virtue ethics has become, increasingly, the way Catholics do fundamental moral theology. Many Catholic moral theologians have moved on into the realms of applied ethics, giving their attention to social issues, sexual questions, and bioethics, with hardly a look back at the arguments of fundamental moral theology. There are small circles where the arguments about the proper understanding of the object of an act continue, but for many with some concern for fundamentals, virtue ethics seems to have become the way to hold onto the Catholic moral tradition without close reflection on particular acts. The argument of this article is simple: virtue ethics in the context of the Catholic tradition must include not only close reflection on particular acts, but the ability to say that there are certain types of acts that are not compatible with the good or virtuous life in the Catholic Christian context. In other words, virtue ethics ultimately does not work as an authentic way of handing on the Catholic moral tradition unless it includes an affirmation of the concept of intrinsically evil acts, and, ideally, some shared agreement about what sorts of acts fall into that category.

Although there are other reasons to insist on the importance of intrinsically evil acts in the Catholic moral tradition, I hope to make my case largely based on the logic and assumptions of virtue ethics. I believe that virtue ethics holds great promise as a fundamental way to conceive of morality in the Catholic tradition. Its focus on the agent and her development over time into a more virtuous and less vicious person, increasingly capable of love of God and love of neighbor, seems to me to get the moral life exactly right. The very logic of virtue ethics, however, demands that necessary connections between the agent, her virtues, and her practical reasoning about how to act well be rooted in and linked to communal practices and a community's vision of the goods and purposes of human life. Although intrinsically evil acts should never be the center of a community's moral discourse, any community that is capable of forming agents in the virtues that would enable them to act well must also be capable—at least in theory—of naming particular kinds of acts that are simply incompatible with its vision of the good life.

The idea of “intrinsically evil acts” is a challenging one for many people doing ethical reflection, including Catholic moral theology, in today's context. We live in a culture where utilitarianism is the water in which we swim; this is particularly true of our students. For them, it is strange to imagine that any moral evaluation of an act can be made by considering

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something other than its effects. Likewise, the influence of subjectivism and relativism can make it seem silly to hold that acts have natures, or that one can know the nature of an act apart from the agent's intention and the circumstances in which he acts. This article, however, will suggest that if we cannot hold that very claim, we cannot claim to be doing virtue ethics either, especially not virtue ethics as a way of being faithful to and handing on moral theology in the Catholic tradition. To that end, I will proceed in several parts. The first section will briefly trace the history of the turn to virtue, and some questions that shift raises. The second section will explore what we mean when we claim that some acts are intrinsically evil. The third section will explore some key markers of virtue ethics approaches to morality and how the rejection of intrinsically evil acts compromises the possibility of doing virtue ethics. The final section will gesture at a few suggestions for moving forward.

The Turn to Virtue

It is no secret that Catholic moral theology spent several centuries mired in an act-centered, sin-centered, confession-driven casuistic manualist focus. There was, of course, always a broader possibility, with roots in Scripture and in the church fathers, of a more person-centered approach that attended more to the interior life of Christians. Of course, Saint Thomas Aquinas had focused much more on virtue and the movement toward union with God than on particular acts or sin or law (though he addressed all of these as well). But in the centuries after Aquinas, the focus was more and more on acts, and specifically sinful, problematic, to-be-avoided acts.

The fathers of the Second Vatican Council knew that moral theology was in desperate need of renewal and issued a call for it to be more deeply rooted in Scripture so that it might better “shed light on the loftiness of the calling of the faithful in Christ and the obligation that is theirs of bearing fruit in charity for the life of the world.”²² This is in fact a call away from the focus on the petty obligations of avoiding particular sinful acts, and an invitation to explore ways to nourish the fundamental calling of the Christian faithful: to grow in the life of charity, which is, traditionally, the form of all the virtues. Note, too, that this line from the council fathers assumes that for the faithful to grow in closeness to Christ and for the faithful to renew the life of the world through charity are not in competition with one another but in fact are together the constitutive elements of a truly Christian moral life. The council fathers called for a moral

²² Vatican Council II, *Optatus Totius* 16, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_optatum-totius_en.html.

theology that would help the faithful grow closer both to Christ and to their neighbors.

At the same time that the council was issuing this call, a young Jesuit named Peter Knauer started a renewal (or revolution) of his own. In a 1965 article entitled "The Hermeneutic Function of the Principle of Double Effect,"²³ Knauer made the then startling suggestion that, based on the logic of the well-established principle of double effect, the object of the act, and therefore the nature of the act, were determined at least in part by the agent's proportionate reason for acting. Part and parcel of his argument was the rejection of the traditional category of intrinsically evil acts. For Knauer, it was only by analyzing a particular action in light of the agent's intention and circumstances that one could determine whether a particular act was evil. There was no room to make such a judgment of categories of acts. For the next fifty years, much of Catholic moral theology was consumed with this very debate, which remained act-centered and in which the question of the possibility of intrinsically evil acts was a key issue.

Even as that debate raged, Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981) hit the shelves and offered a philosophical invitation to consider virtue as an important component of any ethical system. Before long, Jean Porter took up the challenge in the context of Catholic moral theology and offered her *Recovery of Virtue* (1990) as an initial foray into virtue ethics, drawing largely on Thomas Aquinas. Just three years later, in *Veritatis Splendor*, Pope John Paul II attempted to end the proportionalist debates by condemning proportionalism itself (debates about whether his understanding of proportionalism was correct notwithstanding) and by defending (or at least asserting) the concept of intrinsically evil acts. It is hard to say whether the turn to virtue was the result of John Paul II's attempt to end the endless debates about action or whether it was a positive response to the invitation issued by MacIntyre and Porter. Likely both contributed to the shift.

About a decade after *Veritatis Splendor* was promulgated (2002), Aline Kalbian wrote her article "Where Have All the Proportionalists Gone?"²⁴ The piece traces the history and key arguments of proportionalism, its contributions to the field, and the ways those who had argued for it before *Veritatis Splendor* have seemed to disappear in the wake of the encyclical. Along the way, however, Kalbian notes that proportionalism succeeded in shifting the

²³ Peter Knauer SJ, "The Hermeneutic Function of the Principle of Double Effect," in *Moral Norms and Catholic Tradition*, ed. Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick, Readings in Moral Theology 1 (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 1-39

²⁴ Aline Kalbian, "Where Have All the Proportionalists Gone?" *Journal of Religious Ethics* 30, no. 1 (2002): 3-22.

emphasis of Catholic moral theology in three key areas, all toward “a more particularistic approach.”²⁵ Two of these are a more holistic understanding of agency and a “positive valuation ... on proportionate reason,” while the third is the rejection of the category of intrinsically evil acts.²⁶ At the end of the article, Kalbian suggests that proportionalists had not in fact disappeared but had turned to three areas where the more particularistic approach as it had been pioneered in proportionalism could flourish. One of these three areas of moral theology is virtue ethics. (The other two are casuistry and feminism.)

Kalbian herself sees proportionalism as problematically act-centered in its own approach, but insists that it has made a significant contribution to moral theology. She suggests that proportionalism laid the groundwork for a “more integrated view of the moral act” together with “an agent-centered interpretation of the traditional concepts of intrinsically evil acts and proportionate reason.”²⁷ Addressing the contribution of proportionalism to virtue ethics in particular, Kalbian states: “The centrality of the subject in the assessment of acts combined with the call for a more context-dependent examination and analysis of moral norms coincides in significant ways with the explicit agent-centeredness of virtue ethics.”²⁸ Kalbian seems to suggest that the real promise of virtue ethics lies in its ability to remain centered on the agent and to understand his or her acts in their particular context, both the circumstances in which the agent acts and the act’s context within the life trajectory of the agent.

Darlene Fozard Weaver traces this same basic shift at the beginning of her 2011 book *The Acting Person and Christian Moral Life*, saying that “a number of prominent Christian thinkers take up virtue ethics as a deliberate alternative to a focus on moral actions.”²⁹ Weaver’s larger concern (which I share) is the need to focus on both persons and acts well, rightly, and in proper relation to one another. She begins by offering an account of this same history, including this specific turn from revisionist concerns to virtue ethics. Weaver offers James Keenan as a prime example of someone who has made this turn. She quotes Keenan as saying that virtue ethicists “are not primarily interested in particular actions. We do not ask ‘Is this action right?’ ‘What are the circumstances around an action?’ or ‘What are the consequences of an action?’ We are simply interested in persons.”³⁰

²⁵ Ibid., 7.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 16.

²⁸ Ibid., 17–18.

²⁹ Darlene Fozard Weaver, *The Acting Person and Christian Moral Life*, Moral Traditions Series (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011), 19.

³⁰ Quoted in Weaver, *The Acting Person*, 19.

To be fair to Keenan, to say that virtue ethicists are not *primarily* interested in actions is not to say that they are interested in positively ignoring actions. In addition, it is important to note that Keenan, with his deep history and formation in the act-centered debates of the late twentieth century, is less liable than most to forget the importance of moral norms regarding particular acts. Moments like this one can give the impression that talking about virtue is a way of doing moral theology without having to return to all those nasty arguments about acts. But if virtue ethics is coupled with the rejection of the category of intrinsically evil acts (as Kalbian's taxonomy of shifts suggests that it may be), virtue ethics risks moving from an agent-centered system to a merely subjective system of ethical reflection. Whether the rejection of intrinsically evil acts is explicit (rare in the post-*Veritatis Splendor* world of Catholic moral theology) or just quietly assumed as acts are ignored and virtues are celebrated, such a rejection undermines the possibility of a robust, Catholic virtue ethics.

What the Claim That an Act Is Intrinsically Evil Really Means

Let us pause to clarify what intrinsically evil acts are and why it is so tempting to dismiss the concept, before discussing why the concept is crucial to Catholic moral theologians doing virtue ethics. First, note that the word "intrinsic" indicates the use of a spatial metaphor to talk about action. Though Aquinas does not use the term "intrinsic evil," the metaphor gets a good deal of its specifics from question 7 of the *Prima secundae*. In this question Thomas considers, in four articles, the contributions "circumstances" make to the identity of a moral action. Circumstances, etymologically, are those things that "stand around" something else. But in Thomas' analysis, it is clear that what circumstances "stand around" is not the act; they are a part of the act, the details that individuate it. Circumstances stand around "the substance of the act"—unless, Thomas points out, they touch on the two most crucial aspects of the act: what the agent did, and why he did it. In that case, they do not "stand around" the substance but in fact constitute the substance of the act. They make the act the kind of act it is.

This is an understanding of the nature of the act that relies on Aristotle's metaphysics and the distinction between substance and accidents. Circumstances, accidents in things, "fill out" the details that individuate a particular act. Although the idea that there are some types of acts that are always wrong goes back at least to Augustine, calling an act "intrinsically evil" did not happen until much later, but it was based on this understanding of the act; what it named was that the evil was "in" the substance of the act. Note, though, that both "what he did" and "why he did it" are, for Thomas, in the substance of the act. Those who think that the category of intrinsically evil

acts leaves out the agent or the formal component misunderstand this. (Actually, many people who vociferously defend the category also misunderstand it.) Intrinsically evil acts always assume an agent who knowingly, willingly intends, and executes the act. In fact, they assume an agent made by God for union with God, and they make the claim that her willing of this kind of act is incompatible with that end.

Do not get lost in the spatial metaphor. The label “intrinsically evil” makes the claim regarding a species of act that any act of that species is always wrong, by virtue of being that kind of act, and can be known to be so apart from any additional information that could be given about the agent, his intentions, or the circumstances that led him to act in this way. Note that this does not mean, as is sometimes assumed, that intrinsically evil acts are “more evil” than other acts. It simply makes the judgment that they are evil because of the sorts of acts that they are objectively, and they cannot be “made” good by the agent’s further intentions or circumstances.

Some people object simply to the objectivity and universalism of the category. That is, as philosophy, ethics, and even theology have increasingly turned to the personal and the particular, the claim that one can know what an act is “objectively,” apart from consideration of the agent’s intention and other particulars, seems, to many, to be obviously false. At the heart of this objection is the suggestion that what the agent intends can change the meaning and identity of the act. If the moral identity and evaluation of the act depend on what the agent intends, the concept of “intrinsically evil acts” just doesn’t work. The richness of the Catholic moral tradition, however, allows for some consideration of the agent even in intrinsically evil acts. The agent’s circumstances and intention cannot change the fundamental meaning of an act, or make an objectively bad act good, but there are ways to talk sensibly about such factors mitigating (or even completely excluding) the agent’s culpability for the act.

Another objection to the category of intrinsically evil acts is that the category is necessarily dependent on a physicalist approach to moral action. Physicalism is an approach to moral analysis that relies on physical act descriptions alone and sets aside the role of the human will in choosing and executing an action, and in so doing making the action what it is morally.³¹ Now, in a way it is true that the category of “intrinsic evil” suggests exactly that: one knows the act is evil completely apart from knowing anything about the will of the agent. This part of the objection, however, is answered by the fact that the category of intrinsically evil acts always assumes a willing,

³¹ Charles R. Pinches, *Theology and Action: After Theory in Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 63.

intentional agent. In other words, if you could make the case that your act of adultery was somehow done accidentally (for instance, you were seduced by your wife's evil twin), then, although the act is objectively evil, you are not culpable for an act that you did not know you were doing. The act is objectively evil, but the subject is in fact innocent. (Whether his wife agrees with that assessment is another question.)

It is important to note, however, that the charge of physicalism seems to have the most power in relation to those sexual acts that are established as evil by their violation of the natural law. It is unfortunately the case that an incredible amount of ink has been spilled over those intrinsically evil acts that are sexual in nature: sexual sins from contracepting sex to masturbation to homosexual acts have long been described as intrinsically evil. These are often described in overly physicalist terms. It is interesting to note, however, that the list of intrinsically evil acts has long included lying, apostasy, murder, and adultery as well as all these others. The list of intrinsically evil acts that was given in *Gaudium et Spes*, and then quoted in *Veritatis Splendor*, does not specifically list any of these physical sexual sins. Here is the list as given in both of these documents:

Whatever is hostile to life itself, such as any kind of homicide, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, and voluntary suicide; whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, physical and mental torture and attempts to coerce the spirit; whatever is offensive to human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution and trafficking in women and children; degrading conditions of work which treat labourers as mere instruments of profit, and not as free responsible persons; all these and the like are a disgrace, and so long as they infect human civilization they contaminate those who inflict them more than those who suffer injustice, and they are a negation of the honour due to the Creator.³²

Note that what we are given here is several related lists of types of intrinsically evil acts: acts against life, acts against the integrity of the person, acts that offend human dignity, degrading conditions of work. Each list contains several more specific acts. But note the phrase at the end: these acts and others “are a negation of the honour due to the Creator.” In other words, as part of our most basic duty to honor God and to order all aspects of our lives to God, we must also respect life, persons, and human dignity. Types of acts that objectively

³² Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor* (August 6, 1993), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor_en.html, 80, quoting *Gaudium et Spes* 27.

violate any of these must be ruled out. There is no way to say that we love God if we act against life, persons, or human dignity (1 John).

These acts are described primarily in terms not of how they are constituted physically, but in terms of their inability to be ordered to the honor of God. *Gaudium et Spes* and *Veritatis Splendor*, as Saint Thomas Aquinas and most of the church fathers before him and much of the tradition since, understand our end (beatitude) objectively and understand our acts as objectively ordered either toward that end or away from it.³³ Although each act must be subjectively chosen and executed, that subjective choice happens in a context that is objective, or at the very least communally understood and constructed.

Rightly understood, intrinsically evil acts name types of acts that, by their nature, cannot be ordered to ends compatible with the Christian life.

Key Markers of Virtue Ethics

If one looks at the broad philosophical tradition of virtue ethics, it is very difficult to come up with a list of particular virtues or precisely how one might identify what counts as virtue or not. One can point, however, to some key shared attributes that virtue-based approaches to ethics have in common. Though it is not uncontested, Alasdair MacIntyre's work is of course central in this area. In his sweeping work on virtue, he looks at sources as diverse as the Homeric epics, the New Testament, and Benjamin Franklin's *Farmer's Almanac* in an attempt to describe what these and other virtue approaches to ethics have in common. He settles on three basic components: (1) the central (for him) concept of "practice," in which inheres a notion of communally held goods that can and should be developed through such practices; (2) a narrative account of human life and its goals or purposes that can reflectively connect particular practices to the sustainable and sustaining goods inherent to the common life; and (3) location in a community, sustained and sustainable over time in such a way that it constitutes a moral tradition. And, of course, given these components, virtues are those skills that are developed through engagement with the practices and that are in turn essential skills in which individuals must excel if the common life of the community is to be protected, nourished, and passed on. Although MacIntyre's own affinity is for a Thomistic approach, his analysis aims to give an account of what diverse particular accounts of the virtues have in common. Each of the particular contexts he considers, however,

³³ This argument is laid out in detail in the magisterial volume by Servais Pinckaers OP, *Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Sr. Mary Thomas Noble OP (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995).

has a communal form of life that has a shared and thick account either of social roles (Homer, Jane Austen) or of the purpose of human life (Aristotle, New Testament, Aquinas, Franklin), a narrative (or perhaps in some cases, a set of narratives) that sustains that account of roles or purposes, and specific communal practices that embody and instill the excellences toward which the community is directed. Consider MacIntyre's definition of practice:

By "practice" I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.³⁴

Note that this densely packed definition remains broad enough to include any sort of community, any sorts of practices and goods they might have or excellences they might aim to have, and any conception of the ends, purposes, and goods pursued through these practices. But it requires a community, and one that shares practices and conceptions of goods and ends. Note that although the excellences (virtues) inhere in agents, the practices and conceptions of the goods and ends involved are communally performed and collectively held. In other words, although virtue ethics invites and in ways demands an agent-centered approach, it requires not virtuous agents in isolation, but agents formed through communal practices to seek and value communally held goods, ends, and purposes. Virtue ethics demands a community capable of having and sustaining a conversation about the goods and the purposes of human life, and of engaging in shared practices that can both extend participants' understanding of those goods and purposes and equip them with the skills to help all and each (personally and communally) better realize those purposes. Moreover, virtue ethics requires a narrative concerning human life sufficient to hold all this together.

Aquinas noted that every moral act is a human act, proceeding from a deliberate will.³⁵ Following very much in this vein, MacIntyre insists:

[T]he concept of an intelligible action is a more fundamental concept than that of an action as such. Unintelligible actions are failed candidates for the

³⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 187.

³⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1948), I-II.1.1.

status of intelligible action; and to lump unintelligible actions and intelligible actions together in a single class of actions and then to characterize action in terms of what items of both sets have in common is to make the mistake of ignoring this. It is also to neglect the central importance of the concept of intelligibility.³⁶

If an action is not intelligible, it is not a human action. The test of an action's intelligibility is precisely the ability to offer a description of it in which we can recognize the agent as engaged with the world we know, as working toward or against the goods that we share, as making sense in light of the narrative we have about life and its goods. MacIntyre puts it this way: "To identify an occurrence as an action is in the paradigmatic instances to identify it under a type of description which enables us to see that occurrence as flowing intelligibly from a human agent's intentions, motives, passions, and purposes."³⁷ In other words, to call something an action is necessarily to assume both that there is a world of meaning and that agents act for purposes, out of passions, out of inclinations, but all ordered by reason in a way that is shared and thus can be both generally recognized and, if not immediately apparent, then made explicit in a sensible way to other persons who are formed in the same sense of shared goods and purposes as the acting subject.

When a community names some acts as intrinsically evil, it names those as types of acts that cannot be performed in such a way that furthers the shared goods and ends to which that the community is committed. Intrinsically evil actions are always intelligible actions. Yes, we often think and speak of them in the abstract, unparticularized, as if there is no particular agent present. But we are able to do so intelligibly precisely because we describe these acts in ways that name what the agent is doing in a way that presumes an agent intentionally performing this type of act for this type of end. In other words, to assert that an act is intrinsically evil is to assert that such an act, done knowingly and willingly by an agent, undermines the community's shared understanding of the goods and purposes of life. (This may be human life qua human, or it may be Christian life or democratic life, depending on the community.) To insist that there can be no such thing as intrinsically evil acts is to insist either that there is or can be no thickly shared sense of the ends and purposes of life, or that how such ends and purposes are pursued are ultimately dependent either on individual choice or on the particular situation that each agent finds herself in. Either of these claims would make virtue ethics itself nonsensical. If there is no shared agreement on ends and purposes, or if each situation is so radically different, there

³⁶ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 209.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

can be no binding claims about what sort of excellences are required for members of a community to flourish. Likewise, there can be no real sustained conversation (or even argument) about what practices might form agents in these virtues.

The turn to virtue ethics relies on the conviction that a community exists that is capable of forming virtuous agents who can engage in the practices of the community, learn its sustaining narratives, and be formed in its sense of the ends and purposes of its shared life. But a community that cannot deem certain types of action as incompatible with its ends and purposes likely does not have a sufficiently shared sense of those ends and purposes. Thus it could not offer its members in a reliable manner a sense of either those ends and purposes or the narratives and practices that sustain and extend them. We have to question whether such a community is capable of forming virtuous agents at all. And, of course, a community that cannot form virtuous agents also cannot sustain itself. Everyone is for virtue, and for the pursuit of goods and ends. It is much easier to agree on virtue, goods, and ends without having to come to any genuine understanding of precisely that to which we have agreed. To agree on the pursuit of virtues and goods without coming to any genuine shared conception of these is to undermine our ability to form virtuous moral agents, and to undermine our ability to be a genuine community, let alone a community that carries forward the Catholic moral tradition. This is why I think it is crucial that our arguments about virtue ethics include arguments about acts, especially intrinsically evil acts, as well.

Moving Forward

I want to suggest four commitments that I think are essential to the recovery of intrinsically evil acts within the context of virtue ethics.

1. We should commit first of all to charity in all our discussions. The whole purpose of moral theology is to serve the Christian community by reflecting on the acts, practices, virtues, and more that will help us all to grow in love of God and love of neighbor. The sort of vitriol that marked the proportionalist debates does not serve this purpose. We should assume goodwill on all sides, trying to articulate the truth of what is required (or conducive) to growth in charity, holiness, and life in Christ.
2. In that context, it is crucial to commit to continuing the argument about what acts are “intrinsically evil.” We cannot agree to disagree. We cannot skate over deep disagreements about the moral life. We often keep silence in the name of charity. But charity demands that we speak the truth to one another, and listen to the truth as the other names it. The different

perspectives should lead us to a fuller sense of the truth. We need to commit to this argument as a shared practice, and we should understand that practice as one that is constitutive of our community's ability to form persons in virtue. It is also constitutive of our community itself.

3. We must cease using "intrinsic evil" as a club in politics or in other areas of the moral life. Intrinsic evils are not worse than other evils; they are not even always clearer than other evils. Some of these judgments have been very consistently and widely held, but many of them have been the subject of long debates, including what exactly constitutes the type of act in question. We are all well served to remember that in the polarized field of Catholic moral theology, our sense of what everyone holds can vary greatly depending on who our conversation partners are.
4. It is necessary to pay attention to the interior life of agents, even in arguments about intrinsically evil acts. We must never settle for a dismissal of such acts or a defense of them on merely physical terms. Yes, there is always a relation to external acts, but also a relation to the interior life of the agent. Being drawn to intrinsically evil acts indicates an ill-formed will. At its best, such an awareness and engagement with the practice of reflecting on what we will in our acts will form agents who are more capable of identifying the evil in their other acts. Intrinsically evil acts serve as markers in the moral life, boundaries that we should not cross. But the real work of the moral life is to be reflective and intentional in all our acts, to grow closer to Christ and to our neighbor, and to grow in holiness and virtue. This comes not only by choosing good actions and avoiding bad ones, but also through a life of reflection.
5. We should always pair discussion of evil acts with reminders of the central Christian message of forgiveness. The Christian life is actually a series of failures for all of us. Whether the evil we do comes in the form of intrinsically evil acts, or whether we are truly gifted sinners who can turn corporal works of mercy to our own selfish purposes, we all do evil. As teachers particularly, we should consistently teach examination of conscience and motives together with the possibility of repentance and change, and the promise of forgiveness. Ideally, we should tie these together specifically with the idea of being someone who grows in virtue, and invite our students and ourselves to become people of greater holiness and charity, more and more capable of union with God.

Conclusion

I have great faith in virtue ethics as a key vehicle for handing on the Catholic moral tradition in a way that stays focused on the person and her

growth in virtue and holiness over time. But virtue ethics relies on a community with shared conceptions of the good life and a shared sense of the role of particular acts in the formation of the agent and her virtues. My hope is that affirming intrinsically evil acts will bring some necessary attention to the indispensable role of the community and its understanding of the connections between actions, agents, and ends in Catholic virtue ethics.

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III. Human Rights and Intrinsic Evil: The Language of Exceptionless Moral Norms in Catholic Theological Ethics

Any human being who has had the occasion to reflect critically and honestly on experience and human history must eventually consider the possibility of moral absolutes. Almost all people, for instance, would agree that murder, rape, genocide, slavery, and child sexual abuse are always morally unjustifiable. Indeed, one need look no further than the bare language with which we describe these activities to know they are wrong. They are unjust by definition. “Unjust slavery” is a tautological phrase, and there is no such thing as “just genocide.” Virtually all human societies have language and concepts that condemn these types of manifest injustice without exception. Additionally, there is a tacit cultural consensus within societies, formed by moral experience, concerning what does and does not count practically as a genuine instance of each type. For example, we know what does and what does not fall under the category of “murder” only because we have seen case after case of human beings killing each other, sometimes intentionally and other times accidentally, sometimes with just cause and other times without.

In short, our past experience of injustice has made it necessary to construct the exceptionless language we use to condemn injustice in the present. And yet, the fact that we have, in a sense, *invented* absolute normative discourse from the perspective of several cultures does not in itself

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