

Germain Grisez

WHAT ARE moral absolutes? They are specific moral norms which exclude acts of certain kinds universally — e.g., adultery (contraception, abortion, etc.) is *always* morally wrong.

The issue: All Jews and Christians held that some moral norms are absolutes; today, many Catholic theologians dissent and hold that no moral norm is an absolute. Against such theologians, and together with many other Catholic theologians, I defend moral absolutes.

I begin by laying out and criticizing the theological framework which has been articulated by some dissenting theologians, presupposed in its main features by most, but not shared in everything by all. Then I explain and criticize proportionalism, because almost all dissenting theologians mistakenly think it is an approach to normative ethics which can justify choosing acts of kinds excluded by moral absolutes. Finally, I explain and criticize the fundamental theology and ecclesiology which have been used to defend dissenting moral theological dissent.

Summary of dissenting moralists' theological framework:

1. Salvation is not through moral acts, but by grace through faith.

2. On the believer's side, the one thing necessary is a right "fundamental option." One's "fundamental option" is not identical with any particular free choice one makes.

3. Moral goodness is theologically important as a *sign* or *occasion* of a right fundamental option. "Good will," *not* one's actual choice, is all that really matters in the end.

4. There are no peculiarly Christian *specific* moral norms. Christian morality simply is *human* morality. Since humankind develops and changes in the course of history, human morality varies, and thus is *relative* to different epochs and cultures.

5. To maintain that there are absolute "behavioral" norms is to idolize finite goods. For example, innocent human life is only a limited good. Lives should be destroyed if necessary to promote larger and higher goods — for example, ending poverty and oppression.

Criticism of this theological framework:

1. Salvation is *primarily* by grace through faith. But faith itself, on the human side, is a specific moral act. It also requires many other specific moral acts, and cooperation in the work of a specific human covenant community — the Church.

2. There is no human freedom more fundamental than freedom of choice. Faith is the fundamental option of Christian life. One makes one's act of faith by a particular, con-

scious free choice, which persists and organizes one's whole Christian life.

3. Moral goodness is theologically important because: a) God loves us and wants us to be fulfilled as human persons; b) by God's gift, our good lives merit salvation; and c) human goods are *part* of the kingdom, and so have everlasting importance.

4. In the Gospels' accounts of Jesus' life and teaching, one finds a distinctively Christian morality, including peculiarly Christian specific moral norms. Christian faith admits various kinds of historical relativity, but not that relativity which would require Christians to set aside moral absolutes and conform to the contemporary world.

5. Moral absolutes do not absolutize finite goods. Rather, they protect persons. They keep open the way to the only larger and higher end which truly justifies all necessary means — the kingdom. We can contribute to the kingdom, but do not know its overall plan, and must await God's re-creative act which will bring it about.

Proportionalism, providence, and the ultimate point of morality

1. Moral theologians who reject moral absolutes think that legalism led the entire Judaic-Christian tradition into error. Morality, they think, really is a means for promoting human self-realization, well-being, or happiness in this world.

2. So, they hold, moral goodness depends upon other human goods, often called "ontic" or "pre-moral." The morally right choice, they think, is a choice which is expected to bring about overall more pre-moral good or, in a bad situation, less pre-moral bad.

3. This theory often is called "proportionalism" from its emphasis on the proportion of good to bad in possibilities considered for choice. According to proportionalists, an act which otherwise would be immoral can be morally justified if the overall good and bad involved in the action and its expected effects compares favorably with the overall good and bad in its available alternatives.

4. Many proportionalists limit in various ways proportionalism's use. My critique applies to every use of it, however limited it might be in a particular theory.

5. To apply the proportionalist standard, one would have to be able to commensurate (to weigh up or count up and balance) goods and bads in possibilities for choice. But the required commensuration cannot be carried out:

a) In real life, whenever there is to be a free choice, there is an open future, with much unpredictability. Technical judgments, by assuming definite goals, can limit what must be taken into account. Moral reflection is not limited in that way.

b) The point of moral norms is to guide free choices, but if the required commensurability were possible, there would be no free choice to make.

c) "Greater good" and "lesser evil" are used meaningfully in many other contexts, moral and nonmoral, where we do rationally commensurate goods and bads. But that does not show that the commensuration which the proportionalist needs is possible.

6. We also can and do commensurate goods and bads nonrationally. We do it by intuition, which expresses our feelings and proper commitments. But such intuition either prescind from or presupposes moral judgments. So it does not help the proportionalist, whose suggested use of it leads to subjectivism and rationalization.

7. Proportionalism is a post-Christian phenomenon. It resulted from secularizing the idea of the heavenly kingdom, thought of as a definite and limited goal, by substituting (as, for example, in Bentham, Marx, Dewey) some innerworldly goal or goals for the kingdom.

8. But the kingdom, which is the first thing we should seek, is not a definite and limited goal. Rather, it is the fulfillment of God's overall and inclusive plan of creation and redemption. We help prepare material for the kingdom, and moral absolutes provide a framework for our cooperation with divine providence. Thus, it is no surprise that moral absolutes often require us to rely upon God's faithfulness and mercy.

9. The ultimate significance of morality is the selves and interpersonal relationships free choices constitute, for unless these are changed by subsequent choices, they will last forever. Good characters and good human communions will be parts of the kingdom, and God *could not* create them without human cooperation. Proportionalists tend to overlook these lasting *moral* values or to reduce them to psychological values — for example, feeling good, health, or smoothly functioning relationships.

Summary of the fundamental theology and ecclesiology of dissenting theologians

1. They hold that no moral absolute is divinely revealed. Where Scripture seems to propose moral absolutes as divinely revealed, they say that it really only exhorts God's people to do what was considered morally upright on other, independent grounds.

2. Thus, they think that the Church has always erred in teaching some absolute moral norms as certainly true and gravely obligatory requirements for every Christian's life.

3. They say that the Church could err thus because this moral teaching is *noninfallible*.

4. They say that the magisterium can provide *advice* about moral questions and can exhort the faithful to do what is right. However, they think that one's duty to give

religious assent means only that one should carefully consider the magisterium's reasons for the advice it gives, and accept that advice when it seems sound.

5. Therefore, they hold that if one has contrary convictions, based on reasons which one thinks are sound, one need not (or cannot, or may not) accept the magisterium's moral advice. One should act instead on one's contrary convictions.

6. They also think that they, as scholars, are more likely to be correct about moral questions than nonscholarly popes and bishops. They therefore urge bishops, priests, and catechists to apply dissenting opinions in catechetics and the confessional.

Critique of this fundamental theology and ecclesiology

1. Jesus' words and deeds reveal how we are to live. This revelation is present primarily in the Church's faith and living tradition, in whose light we should read Scripture. If read properly, Scripture attests that some moral absolutes are revealed.

2. If the whole people of God up to yesterday erred in its belief about what God expected his people to do as their part of his covenant communion with them, then there never was a people of God or a divine revelation.

3. Infallibility is the Church's gift of certain truth, by which the divinely given act of faith fixes exactly upon the divinely certified revealed content of faith. Hence, whatever the whole Church has believed to be revealed certainly is so. The ordinary magisterium infallibly teaches all those moral norms which the whole Church formerly believed to be certainly true and gravely obligatory norms for Christian life.

4. Teachings infallibly proposed by the ordinary magisterium, although not solemnly defined, should be accepted with faith. There is no room for dissent from them.

5. Even moral teachings which are not infallibly proposed, *if they are proposed as certain*, should be accepted and put into practice, unless one is morally *certain* that they are mistaken. One could have such certitude only if one had a higher, properly *theological* source. Thus, one can know that bishops are wrong if they reject what has been taught in the past by the universal, ordinary magisterium.

6. Dissenting moralists offer only unsound *philosophical* arguments and no properly *theological* arguments for their opinions. Since they are amateur philosophers and are not functioning as theologians, nobody in the Church should give their opinions more weight than one gives the opinions of nonbelieving amateur moralists.

Germain Grisez is the Reverend Harry J. Flynn Professor of Christian Ethics at Mount Saint Mary's College, Emmitsburg, Maryland. The preceding outline of a defense of moral absolutes is based on his book, The Way of the Lord Jesus: Christian Moral Principles (1983).