

The Moral Act

All human beings act, and our actions can be categorized in two ways. A general act is one we perform without thinking about or willing it. When we blink our eyes or breathe, we normally do not think about or will these actions; we just do them. A moral act is different. A moral act is an action that is freely chosen and comes into existence through our exercise of reason and will. For example, the person sitting next to you drops her book on the floor, so you reach down, pick it up, and hand it to her. In this case you fully know what you are doing (picking up the book), and you make the free choice to do it. This is a moral act. Because the act comes into existence through your free exercise of reason and will, it can be morally evaluated. The question is, how do we evaluate a moral act?

Traditionally, moral acts are evaluated using the three-font principle: the object, the intention, and the circumstances. The *object* is an action that is rationally and freely chosen by the will. It is an intentional kind of behavior or thought. Stated more clearly, it is an action that we knowingly and willingly perform. This understanding of object is vitally important because, as Pope John Paul II explained, the morality of any human act “depends primarily and fundamentally” on the object.¹ This means that the object is what gives an action its particular moral character. John Paul II further stated, “The object is the proximate end of a deliberate decision which determines the act of willing on the part of the acting person.”² What did he mean by “a deliberate decision”? The answer to this can be found in the intention.

The *intention* is not, as many suppose, the reason why we act or our motive for acting. Rather, the intention is the choice of the will to do something. For example, my choice to drink a glass of water is my intention. I will (or choose) to drink the water and I do it. Now one cannot see my willing to perform this action, one only sees the result of my willing to perform it. The choice of my will to drink the water is my intention. The actual drinking of the water is the object. The intention and the object are so closely connected that they are often combined under the expression “the intentional act.” It is this intentional act that is subject to moral evaluation.

Now moral acts do not occur in a vacuum; they always occur within a set of *circumstances*. Circumstances involve matters such as who, what, where, when, why, how, and how much. Circumstances are very important because in order to evaluate a particular moral act we must know who is acting and what is involved. For example, did the acting person fully know what he or she was doing? Was the action performed by a two-year-old or a thirty-year-old? Was the amount in question ten cents or ten million dollars?

Certainly each of the circumstances is important for determining the morality of an action, but the most important involves the matter of why. The reason for this is the “why?” question always involves motive. Why did I choose to drink the glass of water? Perhaps I was thirsty. Perhaps I had to take a pill. Perhaps I wanted to suppress my appetite so I would eat less at my next meal. Motive is my reason for choosing to act in a certain way, and it is essential for determining the morality of my act. For example, Mr. Smith has chosen to give fifty million dollars to Caitlin’s college. Why did he choose to do this? Maybe he did it out of generosity, or maybe he was just trying to get his name in the paper. If Mr. Smith chose to give the money out of generosity, then we can say that the object was one of generosity. But if he donated the money simply out of a desire for publicity, then the object is no longer generosity but vain glory. On the surface both actions look the same, but upon further evaluation they are quite different. True, the college benefits regardless of Mr. Smith’s motive, but Mr. Smith will not benefit morally if the gift is given out of a desire for publicity. He has already received his reward.



Another important lesson to be learned from these examples is that one cannot really know the morality of an act except from the perspective of the acting person.³ Only the individual (Christians would add “and God”) can know the object of the act that gives it its moral specificity. When Jesus commanded his followers not to judge lest they be judged (Matthew 7:1–2, Luke 6:37–38), he was specifically referring to this type of judgment. As rational human beings, we can, and should, judge people’s actions to be objectively right or wrong. For example, if we learn that a friend has stolen a cell phone, we *should* judge that action to be morally wrong and, in love, inform her of this fact. However, we need to make a distinction between the objective and subjective nature of the act in question. Objectively the act was morally wrong; however, to our friend it may have seemed, subjectively, to be the best course of action at the time. Thus our friend’s culpability might be greatly lessened due to the circumstances involved,⁴ although this doesn’t change the fact that the act was objectively wrong. The overall point is that because we can never fully know our friend’s motive(s) or the circumstances surrounding her decision, we cannot judge her heart or condemn her as a *person*. We cannot say to her, “You are an evil human being.”

To summarize, the morality of a human act depends primarily and fundamentally on the object, understood as the intentional act. One may choose a course of action for the best of motives—cheating in order to pass a test—but a fundamental principle of morality is that one may never do evil with the intention that good will come of it. In fact, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that some acts are intrinsically evil (that is, evil in and of themselves) and thus choosing them is always morally wrong.⁵ In order for an act to be morally good, all parts of it must be good: the object, the intention, the motive, and the circumstances. Only these kinds of actions are in conformity with the good of the human person. Conscience is the faculty that guides us to choose what is truly good, so let us now explore what conscience is and how it helps us to live a moral life.

Endnotes

1. John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor (Splendor of Truth)* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1993), number 78.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. John Paul II, *Gospel of Life* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1995), number 18.
5. *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*, Second Edition (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), number 1761.

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